

# What does harm reduction mean to parents and other family members?

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When the mounting pressure of drug scenes became so strong that politicians could simply no longer ignore “the problem” any longer and law enforcement had failed on a large scale in fighting drug consumption and traffic, harm reduction was finally implemented in drug policies, programs and practices throughout Europe and overseas. Before this happened, however, thousands of young people had died or were living with with AIDS and hepatitis. We all remember the open drug scenes....

Since 1990 harm reduction has been one of the four pillars of Swiss drug policy, along with prevention, therapy and law enforcement. Does everyone understand what harm reduction means? It seems obvious and self-explanatory but if, in fact, if we take a closer look, its definition varies depending on beliefs, political views, professions, ideologies, relationships, economic interests, etc.

A politician, a psychologist, a narcotics agent, a teacher, a prison guard, a child, an outreach worker, a doctor, a partner, a judge, a mother or a father has different interpretations and different expectations. Among these stakeholders, interpretations are inconsistent even, at times, between parents. We know that there are some who cannot be convinced – who obstinately believe in absolute repression, no matter how much harm it provokes. Quite often, though, opinions change along the way, when lessons are learned from everyday experience sometimes grievously. Who is right and who wrong? Does it make sense to fight over definitions or dogma? For a mother or a father, a partner, a brother or sister concerned by drug related problems, there is only one aim: to preserve the life, the integrity and the future of a beloved family member or friend. The way they choose to support the loved one can be surprising. We have to acknowledge that harm reduction has different meanings even within the same family.