

What is the role of harm reduction when drug users say they want abstinence?

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Background

- Survey data indicate that most drug users approaching treatment services want abstinence rather than harm reduction (McKeganey et al., 2004)
 - DORIS study: 1,007 individuals starting community & residential treatments in Scotland (2001/2002)
 - Q = What changes in your drug use do you hope to achieve by coming to this agency?:
 - 56.6% = abstinence only

Qualitative study of recovery

- Data presented here are part of a larger qualitative study of the everyday lives of recovering heroin users:
 - 40 in-depth interviews (22 males & 18 females; ages 24-50 years)
 - 10 x heroin users starting OST
 - 10 x heroin users beginning a detox
 - 10 x heroin users entering rehab
 - 10 x ex-heroin users (no opioids for 2-36 months)

Questions & probes

- What do you want to get from this treatment?
 - *Example probes:*
 - *And what about your drug use?*
 - *When you say 'drug-free'/'abstinent', what do you mean?*
 - *Does that include alcohol?*
 - *And what about cannabis?*
 - *How likely do you think you are to achieve this?*
- What are your hopes and goals for the future?
 - *Example probes:*
 - *And in relation to your drug use?*

Desire for abstinence

- Over half expressed a desire to be abstinent/ drug-free
 - “It’s all got to be abstinence...I should have enough in me, and think enough about myself and all the things I've done in my life... to go out and enjoy myself and do things without needing the back up of drugs or drink.” (Female, 44 years, rehab)
 - “I really want it to work...I wanna be clean. I don’t wanna be thinking of drugs and alcohol for the rest of my life.” (Female, 49 years, ex-user)

However...

- Many who wanted abstinence were not sure they could achieve this
- Some wanted to continue using drugs other than heroin
- Some were unsure whether they wanted to continue using drugs other than heroin
- Some wanted to control their drug use rather than stop using all drugs
- Some believed that they needed to use other drugs to control their heroin use
- Some wanted to continue using cannabis & alcohol, but knew this was impossible if they wanted to stop using heroin
- Some wanted to stop using heroin & address other drug use later
- Some wanted to stop using heroin now, but could not say 'forever'
- Almost all smoked tobacco, but did not generally consider this in relation to being drug free

Some complexities of wanting abstinence

“What you just said to me is ‘do I want to stop taking drugs?’, or something like that... Now, yes I do, but it’s an impossible thing to say...because if you say ‘cocaine’, I love cocaine. It’s a good fun drug, and if you can control it, it’s great. Now if you say ‘forever’, that’s a very, very impossible thing for me to say. Yes I would like not to take crack and heroin ‘forever’, but it’s a very hard thing to say.” (Male; 43 years; OST).”

“I think I’ll always smoke a little pot...I do have a drink every now and then ...With the heroin and stuff like that, it’s a hard question ‘cos I might like to [use] sometimes. When I was using, I used to think to myself ‘I’ve just got to accept the fact that I’m a heroin addict and that’s how it is for me’ ... I’d like to say I’d be able to have a little bit now and then ... but I don’t know if I could do that or not. It’s all kind of new ground to me. I don’t know it’s a hard question.” (Female; 31 years; rehab).

Other treatment goals

- **Relationships:** being a good parent; being able to live with children again; having a good relationship with a partner/ spouse; having friends; wanting reciprocal relationships
- **Life:** living a normal or better life; having a new start
- **Psychological goals:** being happy; feeling confident; experiencing self-esteem; finding oneself; coping without drugs
- **Activities:** finding employment; participating in education; re/discovering hobbies; travelling the world
- **Possessions:** securing accommodation; having some money; owning a car/ driving licence/ passport
- **Health:** sorting out health problems, particularly teeth; getting fit; looking better; being healthier

Abstinence & other treatment goals connect

“I applied for a few cleaning jobs, shop jobs...like I want to get my passport...My ban finished last year for driving, so I want to get...my licence back. I want to get a car. I won’t be able to get that if I’m on smack [heroin] every day.” (Female, 35 years, OST)

“[I want to] get to know myself... confidence and self esteem...I’d like other people to see me clean...some health as well, obviously, put on weight...just be able to live a normal life, without being ruled by a need to get heroin all the time.” (Male, 30 years, rehab)

Summary

- Many drug users starting treatment say that they want to be drug-free/ abstinent
- It is very difficult to ascertain what exactly drug users mean when they say they want to be drug-free/ abstinent:
 - Abstinence is not a clearly defined concept (from what drugs?; no use or controlled use?; for how long?)
 - Individuals often do not know what they want
 - Individuals find it difficult to distinguish between what they want and what they can realistically achieve
- When individuals access drug treatment, they have many goals & separating drug use & other goals is often not possible

What is the role of HR when drug users say they want abstinence?

- They might not mean abstinence from all drugs; they might not want abstinence now; & they might still want HR (particularly in relation to drugs such as alcohol & cannabis)
- HR services can still provide support with, & minimise the harms drug use causes to, relationships; everyday routines and activities; general health & well-being (including identity, self-confidence, self-esteem); employment & housing
- HR clearly has an important role to play when drug users say they want abstinence

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