

Public Health Approach to Substance Use



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The Normalizing Conversations project team understands a public health approach to substance use as one that:

Is collaborative and comprehensive, and ensures a continuum of programs and services are available to meet people where they are at.

- Providing comprehensive services requires placing equal emphasis on treatment and harm reduction, and allowing individuals to decide what approach is best for them.

Respects the autonomy and right to self determination of people who use substances.

- All individuals have the right to decide what choices are best for them. This specifically pertains to Indigenous People who have historically had these rights denied.

Approaches substance use through a health and human rights framework, not a criminal justice framework, while acknowledging the historic and current harms of drug policy.

- This lens challenges the current model that focuses on individual responsibility and criminalization, and shifts towards creating systems that acknowledge and respect human rights.

Supports the underlying determinants of health and addresses health inequities.

- Health inequities exist when there are unjust differences in health between groups of people. These are influenced by determinants including housing, access to health care, employment, and education.

Is pragmatic and evidence-informed.

- Approaches to substance use must be informed by current, relevant evidence that reflects the needs and voices of people who use drugs.

Works to end stigma and discrimination.

- Collaboration is needed to address all levels of stigma and discrimination, from interpersonal interactions to structures and systems.

Recognizes and collaborates with people with lived and living experience of substance use as experts, and fairly compensates them for their work.

- People with lived and living experience must be meaningfully engaged about all decisions that impact them.

Acknowledges that substance use exists on a spectrum, with both harms and benefits, and focuses on reducing potential harms and maximizing potential benefits.

- This approach recognizes the importance of harm reduction services and discussing drug use in a neutral way.

Works to protect and promote the freedom, health, wellness, and safety of people who use substances.

- These rights must be provided to all people and should not be based on their substance use.

Is trauma- and violence-informed, gender transformative, anti-racist, anti-oppressive and culturally safe.

- Addressing racism and other forms of discrimination requires accountability, and the understanding that impact matters regardless of intent. This must include a focus on the impacts of intergenerational trauma, especially on Indigenous and Black communities.