



## **Liberatory Harm Reduction Peer Support Group Charter**

***If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time, but if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.***

***-Lilla Watson***

*Since 2020, the Yarrow Collective has hosted healing spaces for conversations around suicide, despair, and substance use that otherwise rarely happen. Liberatory Harm Reduction was built on the shoulders of trailblazers, such as black trans women, queer folks, people with HIV, sex workers, the Black Panthers and The Young Lords, who created this approach in the process of saving their own lives when they were failed by traditional institutions or treatment systems. Peer Support is a way of being in relationship with one another based on the wisdom held in communities of people with shared lived experience. Taken together, Liberatory Harm Reduction Peer Support involves speaking about, sitting with, and relating with substance use and people who use drugs in radically new ways. Liberatory Harm Reduction and Peer Support represent embodied ways of being in relationship, not simply job titles for a new professional specialty, and both hold deep roots in by/for/with liberatory movements and BIPOC ancestral legacies.*

*This Charter defines the principles and values of Liberatory Harm Reduction Peer Support. The Yarrow Collective currently operates two Liberatory Harm Reduction Peer Support Groups serving Northern Colorado and offers training in this model to groups and communities seeking to continue the long tradition of liberatory harm reduction that was set forth by the many brave individuals fighting to keep their communities alive.*

### **Harm Reduction is a Philosophy Beyond “Public Health”**

Harm reduction is often thought of as a set of approaches implemented by public health systems for “high risk” people who use drugs. Common harm reduction tools, like Narcan or testing strips, are indeed life-saving interventions, but there is more to it than that. Sharing information and tools is part of how we get freer; withholding these things is actually an exertion of power over people and communities. Providing safer drug using supplies and information is life-saving on a basic level, but harm reduction as a philosophy invites deeper conversation and connection.

Beyond a set of interventions, harm reduction is a life philosophy that at its core is interpersonal, rooted in liberation, and an expression of radical love. We expand the concept of harm reduction to include the radical act of centering our humanity with compassionate witnessing, non-judgment, genuine connection, and authentic relationship. Harm reduction and peer support are similar in that they are both a practice and embodied way of being and relating – rooted in long traditions of liberatory and justice movements. With these practices, we are connecting back to communal

bonds and ways of being with one another before these ways of relating became a professional endeavor of western healthcare systems. Practicing harm reduction and peer support means you make a conscious decision to open your heart to genuinely witness, care, and connect with other humans who are all inherently worthy of connection. In this way, harm reduction is made of both concrete tools and the invisible space we inhabit, which together are life-saving and life-connecting.

### **Autonomy and Respect**

Liberatory Harm Reduction Peer Support groups prioritize consent and self-determination, and recognize and respect the many ways that people can be in relationship with substances. We acknowledge people can use even highly stigmatized substances in non-chaotic ways or at perfectly managed levels. In fact, most drug use *is* non-problematic, which challenges the common stigma that people who use drugs are damaged, broken, or living out-of-control lives. We have no agenda to steer people toward abstinence, recovery, or any particular outcome nor to “save” people from substance use. We do not shortcut a person’s discovery of their own journey in managing their drug use through pressure or persuasion to adopt a particular path. We avoid power differentials in playing roles of the “fixers” and “fixees” or the “sponsors” and “sponsees.” Instead, our focus is on our genuine connections with one another, our mutual experiences, and filling educational gaps in harm reduction approaches to safer drug use. As a community, we are responsible to be honest, transparent and present with one another, but cannot be responsible for one another’s choices or actions.

### **Responses to Injustice and Stigma**

The realities of poverty, class, racism, social isolation, trauma, violence, unfair discrimination and other social inequities and inherited struggles affect people's vulnerability and capacity for effectively dealing with drug related harm. We validate and explore the hurt and pain we experience from the realities of systemic oppression and injustice. Together, we make space to explore the unique ways each of us makes meaning of and responds to these injustices. We challenge harmful stigmas associated with drug use while uplifting the voices of people who use drugs to speak about their experiences. Outside of reducing harms of drug use, harm reduction is also essential to thinking about many things that threaten BIPOC and other marginalized groups who are the targets of discrimination and violence. Harm reduction can include, for example, how people of color find ways to contort their appearance, stance, and emotions in order to not become a target of harm or violence within a white supremacist culture. Through education, tools, relationship and community building, Liberatory Harm Reduction Peer Support seeks to transform the root causes of the oppression that increases the risks of illness, death, and incarceration in our communities.

### **Liberatory Practice in Community**

Institutions tend to operate from a fear of liability with policies and rules that often seem to serve the needs of programs and agencies, not people. The reality is, we have been hurt in relationships and we have been hurt in community, and this is why we must come to heal in relationship and heal in community. In community, our strength hinges on the relationships we have with one another and our felt sense of safety is created from there. Liberatory Harm Reduction is a natural outgrowth of BIPOC ancestral legacies. The concept of communities keeping themselves safe from harm through practices of love, welcoming people in, sharing any abundance that exists, and together making a better life for everyone is deeply rooted in the cultural practices of many BIPOC who have found ways to survive in a colonized society founded in white supremacist culture. In contrast to the more technocratic model of providing public health services, Liberatory Harm Reduction is a way of building emotionally sustainable communities. It means seeing each other as whole people – not just our worst parts – and practicing radical love from exactly where we are. For many people, working through trauma includes acknowledging the pain that can come from feeling like they don't belong, or from being hurt or rejected by people with whom they have felt connection to. In groups, we make space for envisioning a world where one consistently has a sense of belonging and where meaning and purpose is possible.

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