



We Need to Care for Ourselves: Addressing Mental Health in Harm Reduction

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Introduction

The mental health of harm reduction workers has emerged as a critical and often overlooked issue within the broader context of drug policy and social care in Europe. These professionals operate in emotionally demanding environments, frequently exposed to trauma, systemic inadequacies, and societal stigma. Structural challenges such as inadequate funding, unsupportive political climates, and lack of coordinated services compound the psychological strain faced by staff. At the same time, interpersonal difficulties, blurred boundaries with clients, and a strong emotional investment in their work further contribute to the risk of burnout and secondary trauma. Recognising the urgent need for targeted support, Correlation – European Harm Reduction Network has conducted a mapping study and developed practical recommendations aimed at fostering the mental well-being of harm reduction workers, underscoring the necessity of systemic, organisational, and individual-level interventions.

Objectives

- (1) Raise awareness about the mental health challenges specific to harm reduction staff;
- (2) Identify factors that impact staff well-being;
- (3) Provide evidence-based and context-sensitive recommendations;
- (4) Promote the integration of mental health into harm reduction policies, practices, and organisational cultures;
- (5) Foster long-term improvements in service quality and staff retention by advocating for investment in mental health resources and support systems.

Methods

- (1) Mental Health Challenges
In-depth interviews with 31 harm reduction professionals from 31 European cities, focused on their mental health, workplace challenges, and coping mechanisms.
- (2) Mental Health Recommendations
Review of international guidelines and literature on workplace mental health
Four focus group discussions to ensure guidelines’ reliance across different national contexts, involving front-line staff and managers from diverse European countries

Results

Challenges

System Related

Unsupportive policy and political environment
Tension with other services

Individual and Interpersonal

Ensuring a work-life balance
Navigating staff’s expectations of change
Creating personal boundaries with clients
Coping with a client’s death
Relationships with colleagues

Job Satisfaction and Work Environemnt

Dissatisfaction with salary
Lack of job security
Lack of job mobility and professional development
The effects of staff turnover

Recommendations

Recommendations for Organisations

Internal Measures

Cultivate a positive organisational culture
Train managers in mental health
Promote mental health education and awareness among staff
Establish capacity building programmes to standardise approaches
Review workloads, duties, and responsibilities
Provide recognition and rewards for effort
Create safe and confidential reporting mechanism
Conduct annual mental health check-ins
Integrate safety and ergonomic practices to enhance employee well-being
Promote diversity, equity, and inclusion to foster a supportive workplace culture
Implement participatory approaches to job design
Foster social connectedness among staff
Organise team building activities
Support staff in being part of regional, national and internal professional groups
Provide individual therapy to support staff well-being
Provide group therapy to support staff well-being
Support people with mental health conditions at work
Have a plan to assist emergency cases
Provide comprehensive onboarding resources

External Measures

Promote interaction with other services and organisations
Foster participation in local networks
Promote education and awareness

Recommendations for Managers

Learn to notice potential signs of poor mental health
Identify and handle conflicts among team members
Encourage open conversations about mental health
Provide supervision and ongoing support to staff
Foster open and private conversations about stress
Performance management and appraisal
Support and recognise staff efforts
Promote awareness of support options
Periodically check your managerial competencies for supporting well-being

Recommendations for Workers

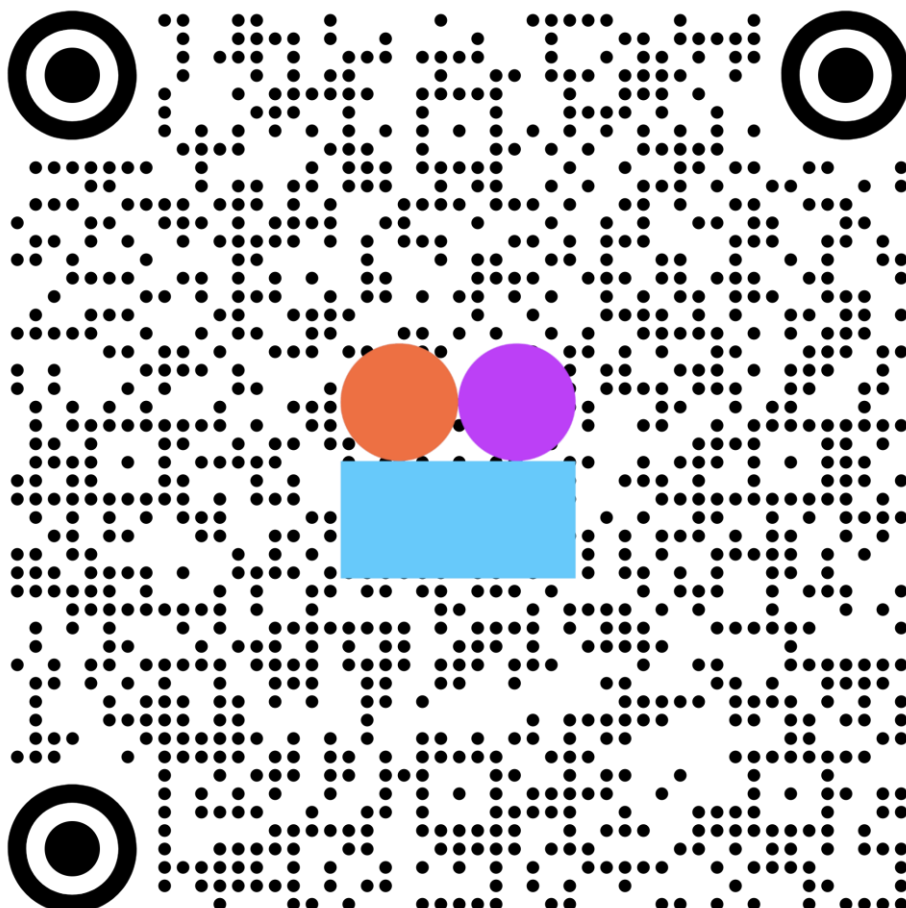
Take Care of Yourself

Prioritise your personal well-being
Separate work and personal life
Create boundaries with clients
Recognise alert signals and take action
Talk about your feelings
Stay active and care for your physical health
Maintain a good diet and make mindful choices
Stay connected with colleagues
Seek support when needed
Prioritise breaks and personal time
Embrace yourself and accept who you are
Strengthen your resilience
Establish clear expectations
Cultivate mindfulness
Engage in professional development opportunities

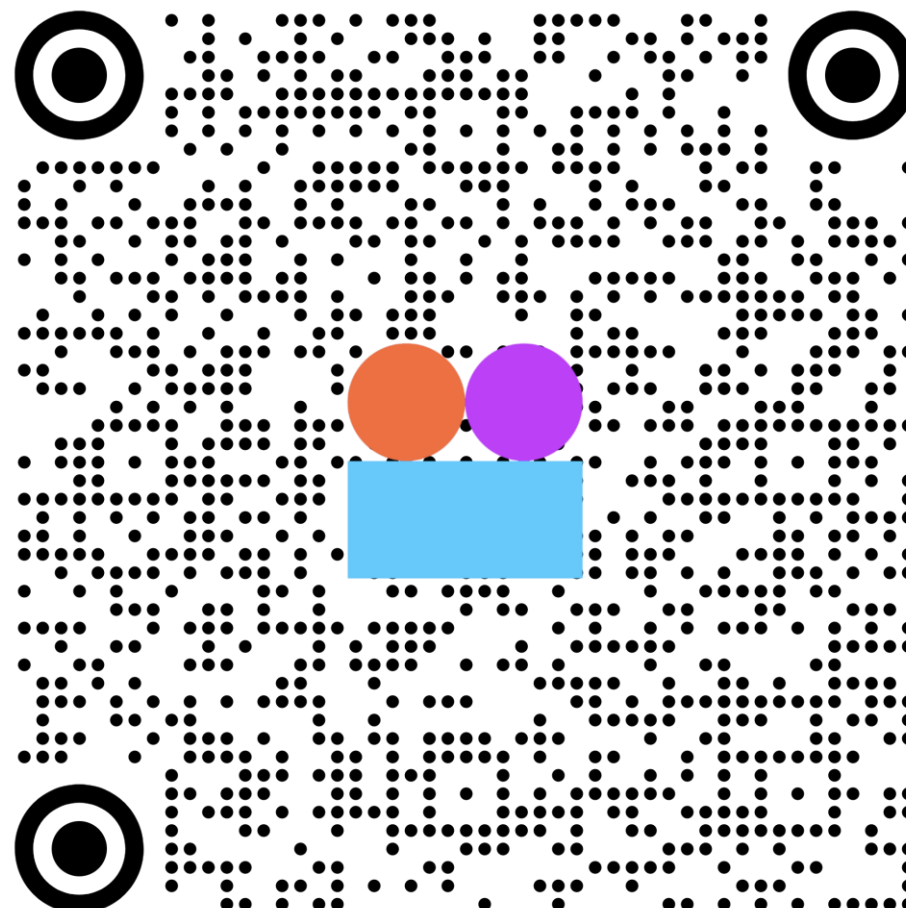
Offer Support to Your Colleagues

Encourage colleagues to take breaks and offer support when needed
Ensure confidential and private spaces for sensitive conversations with colleagues
Practice active listening

The Mental Health Challenges Faced by Harm Reduction Staff



Mental Health Recommendations for Harm Reduction Staff



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References

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