Integrating Harm Reduction into Chemsex Care

Even when abstinence is the goal.

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Harm Reduction

In harm reduction, treatment starts with the client's needs and personal goals. Any change that reduces substance-related harm is valuable.

Tatarsky, 2003

Why Is Harm Reduction Relevant for Every Client?

Drug effects and the role of sexual activity	Substantial potential for dependence and other harms; effects on the brain’s reward system
Difficulty achieving abstinence	The role chemsex plays in a person's life and any co-occurring conditions.
Return to substance use	Potential physical, psychological and social harms associated with a return to substance use.

Poulios, 2024; Tay et al., 2023; Tatarsky, 2003

Harm Reduction: From Client Needs to Goals

No abstinence requirement

Support is offered even when substance use continues.

A goal agreed with the client

Abstinence, changes in patterns of use or reduction of harm.

Addressing the function

Sexuality, available alternatives and co-occurring conditions.

Review and adjustment

The goal and action plan may change over the course of treatment.

Abstinence may be a goal, not a prerequisite for starting therapy.

Tatarsky, 2003; Brodzikowska, 2025

Identyfying Appropriate Interventions

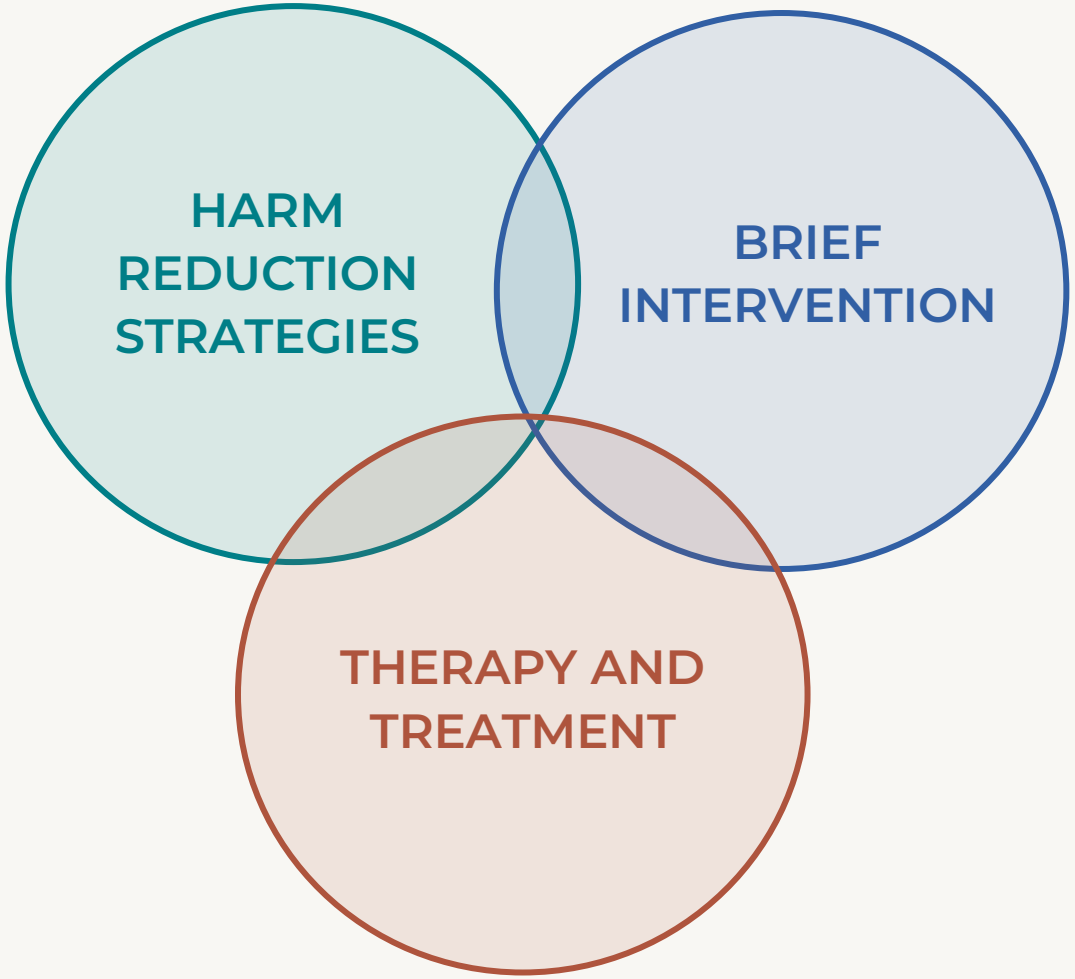
Pattern of substance use	Substances used, frequency and methods of use, extent of loss of control and sexual practices.
Functions of chemsex	Sexuality, pleasure, intimacy and regulation of dysphoric states.
Co-occurring conditions	The nature of these conditions and their potential impact on substance use dynamics.

Co-occurring conditions and relevant psychosocial factors:

attachment-related difficulties · personality disorder traits · CPTSD · PTSD minority stress · intraminority stress · ADHD · autism spectrum conditions

Blanc et al., 2024; Freestone et al., 2025

Applying Harm Reduction Into Chemsex Interventions



Harm Reduction Strategies

Substances, patterns of use, interactions, informed sexual consent and health.

Brief Intervention

Identifying an acceptable goal and ways to achieve it.

Therapy and Treatment

Tailored to the functions of substance use and co-occurring conditions.

Brodzikowska, 2025

Selected Harm Reduction Strategies

BEFORE	DURING	AFTER
Substance effects and interactions	Following the substance use plan	Rest and physical recovery
Harm reduction strategies	GHB/GBL: dosing and timing, mixing with other substances	Testing for HIV, HCV and other STIs
Substance use plan	Safer injecting: sterile equipment use and safer injecting techniques	HIV PEP and doxy-PEP, where indicated
Sexual boundaries	Preventing overheating	Safe GHB withdrawal
Testing, HIV PrEP and doxy-PEP	Informed sexual consent	
Vaccinations	Overdose response	

Poulios, 2024; Tay et al., 2023

Brief Intervention: Key Principles

ASSESS

Perceived benefits and costs associated with chemsex.

CHOOSE A GOAL

Identifying the desired change and potential difficulties.

PLAN AND REVIEW

Selecting actions and assessing their outcomes.

Chemsex Check

Experiences, boundaries, goals and the choice of a first step.

ChemSex Care Plan

Selecting a goal, identifying potential difficulties and planning actions.

Chemsex Check, 2023; Stuart, 2017

Therapy and Treatment

Functions of substance use	Sexuality, intimacy and regulation of dysphoric states.
Concurrent interventions	Substance use, sober sex and co-occurring conditions.
Abstinence as goal	A plan to reduce potential harms in the event of a return to substance use.

Return to substance use → assess any resulting harm and revise the plan.

Tatarsky, 2003; ASAM/AAAP, 2024

Resources for Clinical Practice

Chemsex screening questions	Chemsex screening tool based on ASSIST*
Chemsex Check	ChemSex Care Plan
Self-assessment questionnaire on the consequences of chemsex	Chemsex harm reduction manual
www.chemsex.pl website	www.controllingchemsex.com (in English)

* Chemsex-specific adaptation of ASSIST; not validated.

Thank you.

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Downloadable resources



link.pawlega.com/konferencja