

## Handout: Exceptions and Harm Reduction

### Introduction:

This handout explores the concept of "exceptions" in the context of substance misuse treatment and how it relates to Harm Reduction (HR). Drawing from Dr. Seán Foy's book, "Solution Focused Harm Reduction," this handout aims to provide a deeper understanding of how identifying and amplifying exceptions can empower individuals on their journey towards reducing harm.

### Exceptions: Identifying Moments of Strength:

In Solution Focused Brief Therapy (SFBT), **exceptions** refer to instances when the problem the client is facing is not present or is less intense. These moments, however small or infrequent, offer valuable insights into the client's strengths, resilience, and existing coping mechanisms.

- **Deliberate Exceptions:** These occur when the client consciously chooses to engage in behaviors that reduce or stabilise their substance use or prevent negative consequences. For example, choosing not to drink alcohol before driving or abstaining from cannabis use before an important event.

- **Random Exceptions:** These happen unintentionally, often due to circumstances beyond the client's control. For example, being unable to access substances due to financial constraints or unexpectedly spending time with non-using friends.

### The Power of Exceptions:

Identifying and exploring exceptions can:

- **Shift focus from problems to solutions:** Instead of dwelling on what's not working, exceptions highlight what *is* working, even if it's only for a short period. This can foster a sense of hope and agency.

- **Uncover hidden strengths and resources:** By understanding how clients manage exceptions, therapists can help them recognize their existing coping skills and build upon them.

- **Challenge negative self-perceptions:** Recognizing exceptions can help clients challenge negative beliefs about themselves and their ability to control their substance use.

- **Inform treatment planning:** Understanding the context of exceptions can help therapists and clients co-construct realistic and achievable goals.

### Harm Reduction and Exceptions:

HR is an approach that aims to reduce the negative consequences of substance use without necessarily requiring abstinence. It recognizes that individuals may not be ready or willing to stop using substances completely but can still make positive changes to reduce harm.

●**Alignment with SFBT principles:** Both HR and SFBT prioritize client autonomy, respect individual choices, and focus on incremental progress rather than demanding immediate and complete change.

●**Meeting clients where they are:** HR acknowledges that individuals may have varying levels of motivation for change and tailors interventions accordingly.

●**Recognizing small victories:** Within an HR framework, any reduction in harm is considered a success, aligning with SFBT's emphasis on celebrating exceptions, no matter how small.

### **Practical Applications:**

When working with clients who misuse substances, consider the following:

●**Explore exceptions in detail:** Ask open-ended questions to understand the context, thoughts, feelings, and behaviors associated with exceptions.

●**Amplify and reinforce exceptions:** Help clients recognize the significance of exceptions and acknowledge their efforts, even if they seem insignificant.

●**Link exceptions to client goals:** Discuss how the skills and strategies used during exceptions can be applied to achieve their desired outcomes.

●**Co-construct homework tasks:** Encourage clients to experiment with behaviors that replicate or extend exceptions in their daily lives.

●**Provide relevant information:** Share information about HR strategies and resources that can support clients in making positive changes.

### **Conclusion:**

Integrating the concept of exceptions within an HR framework provides a powerful approach to working with individuals experiencing substance misuse. By focusing on strengths and celebrating small victories, therapists can empower clients to make meaningful changes, reduce harm, and build a more fulfilling life.

## **Worksheet Tip below**

**You may find the prompts below helpful when considering looking for exceptions.**

**Instructions:** Think about times when the problem you are seeking help with is less of an issue or not present at all. Answer the following questions, reflecting on these "exceptions."

1. **Describe a specific time when the problem was less noticeable or not happening.** *Example from book:* In a case study, a client named Stephen, who used cannabis, hadn't smoked for two weeks because he had been caught. The therapist focused on this period as an exception to his usual pattern.
2. **What were you doing differently during that time?** *Example from book:* Stephen, when asked if he had thought about smoking during that two-week period, said, "Yeah, sure, a few times... It helped to keep busy."
3. **What factors or circumstances contributed to this exception? Think about your environment, the people you were with, your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.**

4. **What did you learn from this experience?**
5. **How can you use this information to create more of those positive experiences?**
6. **What is one small thing you can do this week to build on this exception?**