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BOOKSHELF

'Undoing Drugs' Review: First, Do Less Harm

Needle exchanges, bleach kits and other forms of 'harm reduction,' though once controversial, are now mainstream. Will they stay that way?



PHOTO: GETTY IMAGES

By *Sally Satel*

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Fifty years ago, Richard Nixon declared what came to be known as the War on Drugs. The first of its two major campaigns was aimed at disrupting supply lines—from coca and poppy fields abroad to dealers in the U.S. The second was aimed at reducing demand: discouraging drug use, especially among teenagers, and providing treatment to those who had succumbed to addiction.

Both efforts continue today, with varying degrees of success (and failure). The second one in particular, over time, has required a change of tactics. It turned out that, when it comes to treatment, not all users want it, and even many of those who do may drop out of treatment programs. What to do about these hold-outs: people who have no intention of quitting drugs or who, having started in a program, find the prospect of quitting too daunting?

Undoing Drugs

By *Maia Szalavitz*

(Hachette Go, 372 pages, \$30)

This is where “harm reduction” comes in. A classic example is clean-needle distribution, a practice that slims the odds of drug users becoming infected with Hepatitis C and HIV, the virus that causes AIDS. Harm-reduction workers “meet people where they are at,” as the slogan goes, without judgment. The approach is part of a larger effort to mitigate the effects of drug prohibition: e.g., the reluctance of users to seek medical help out of fear of arrest or to enter programs geared toward abstinence. The effort extends to providing apartments (the “housing-first” approach) where drug use is condoned. The idea is to embrace users and nudge them toward social functioning, even toward abstinence—but on the client’s time line.

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**Undoing Drugs: The Untold Story of
Harm Reduction and the Future of
Addiction**

By Maia Szalavitz

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Undoing Drugs

The Untold Story of
Harm Reduction and the
Future of Addiction

Maia Szalavitz

Author of New York Times Bestseller Unbroken



Science journalist Maia Szalavitz has been an avid participant in the “harm-reduction movement” since her days of heavy drug use. In “Undoing Drugs,” she tells her own story and offers the first popular account of the movement’s people and politics.



Maia Szalavitz.

PHOTO: ASH FOX

In 1986, the 20-year-old Ms. Szalavitz was living in New York’s East Village, having been suspended from Columbia University for dealing cocaine and now injecting cocaine and heroin. At the time, she didn’t know that needle sharing put her at risk for HIV. When an acquaintance warned her against sharing needles and, if she did share, urged to run bleach through the syringe, she was “furious” that such information wasn’t widely known.

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PREVIEW

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Three years later, shriveled to 85 pounds, she had freed herself of her addiction with the help of treatment and was “eager to get on with my life.” Most of all, she “wanted to be a journalist and . . . spread better information about AIDS and addiction.” She began contributing to the Village Voice and Newsday, worked as a producer at PBS and

eventually wrote or co-authored several books, including “Unbroken Brain” (2016), in which she argued that addiction is the product not of a diseased brain but of a variety of forces, including family, peers, culture, genes and chemicals.

Early in “Undoing Drugs,” we are introduced to a social worker named Edith Springer, a former drug user herself, now regarded as “the Goddess of Harm Reduction.” After meeting a man from the U.K. who was running a project that handed out clean needles, Ms. Springer began distributing bleach kits in forlorn sections of the Bronx and Brooklyn.

In the 1980s and 1990s, as Ms. Szalavitz reminds us, the War on Drugs enjoyed wide public support, and almost all addiction professionals insisted that abstinence was the only path to salvation. Unsurprisingly, Ms. Springer met with hostility and anger as she tried to advance the idea of harm reduction, as did others: a Puerto Rican activist, Yolanda Serrano, who organized hunger strikes in the AIDS ward at the Rikers Island jail demanding medical attention for inmates; a San Francisco “consortium of rebels [and] researchers” who promoted the idea of cleaning needles with bleach; and the late Chicagoan Dan Bigg, who helped get a medication called naloxone, an antidote to opioid overdose, out of hospitals and onto the street.

“By reframing drug policy to target harm rather than highs,” Ms. Szalavitz writes, such activists “popularized once-radical ideas and forever altered the debate.” And indeed, harm reduction has become more mainstream. Only this March, Congress appropriated money specifically for programs that distribute clean needles and other supplies intended to protect users from themselves.

Deeply researched and character-driven, “Undoing Drugs” is vivid social history. Ms. Szalavitz, who sees harm reduction as “radical empathy,” alludes throughout her narrative to the rights of drug users. Surely, she implicitly asks, they have the right to be treated with dignity, to receive proper medical care, to have access to pertinent facts?

The answer is “yes,” but one has to wonder: Are there no responsibilities alongside such rights? Ms. Szalavitz tends to present even the more radical forms of harm reduction as an unambiguous social good. But addicts exist in a social context, and what may help one person may hurt another. What of the other residents placed in a “housing-first” facility who want to stay off drugs but are sabotaged by their still-using neighbors? What about the streets of San Francisco and Seattle, where harm-reduction workers appear to condone tent encampments in parks meant for children and tolerate drug dealing and the harassment of passersby?

The champions of harm reduction tend to be silent about such matters, and their silence is often taken for complicity. Ms. Szalavitz might have grappled with the tension between helping addicted people and compromising the well-being of others. There is a lot at stake.

Officials and legislators in West Virginia and Indiana have acted to limit or shut down needle exchanges, despite evidence that such programs do curb disease transmission. Other states might well follow suit, an especially worrisome possibility as new government data show that overdose deaths climbed 30% between December 2019 and December 2020. “Undoing Drugs” makes the long struggle of harm-reduction activists come alive and, along the way, shows why their most obvious successes shouldn’t be rolled back.

Dr. Satel, a psychiatrist, is a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute and a visiting professor at the Vagelos College of Physicians and Surgeons at Columbia University.

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