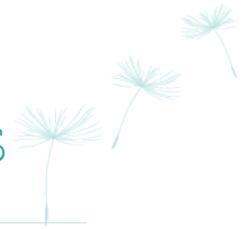


FIVE WAYS TO EXTEND ADVOCACY EFFORTS

BY TIM HARRINGTON



1. **Wide Wonder = changing current perceptions of those with mental illnesses and the perceptions of drugs and those who use them by providing reliable and consistent information.**

We work hard to influence public opinion for the better, as behavioral healthcare leaders play important roles in shaping what the public believes and have a moral responsibility to provide evidence-based and accurate information. We will be bold when disputing perceptions about mental illness and drugs that are not grounded in facts and that may be discriminatory toward those with mental illness and those who use drugs. We will stand our ground in the face of public opinion. When anyone chooses to stoke fears about people with mental illnesses and drugs and drug use in order to retain or intensify prohibition, they are indirectly creating serious challenges for some of our most vulnerable citizens. When all of us instead choose to challenge current perceptions about people with mental illnesses and drugs and those who use them, we will make a real difference. In terms of drugs and drug use, I encourage you to research policies implemented by Portugal in response to its challenges around drug use.

2. **Wide Wonder = responsibility for shaping public opinions and perceptions of those with mental illnesses and drugs and those who use them and promoting the use of nonstigmatizing and nondiscriminatory language.**

It is up to us to become powerful allies in correcting misinformation surrounding drug use and reducing the stigma of those who use drugs and those with mental illnesses. In particular, the use of degrading and inappropriate language - such as "clean," "dirty," "addicts," "junkies," "alkies," and "druggies" - should be addressed and corrected. We must stop spreading misinformed beliefs, which can potentially result in disastrous situations for those with mental illnesses and those who use drugs, their communities, and the most vulnerable segments of society.

3. **Wide Wonder = participating in the debate, sustained activism and advocacy, and keeping governments, the judiciary, mayors, media, and healthcare and social professionals accountable.**

We have the ability to transform this debate. Activism must be ongoing in order to develop the ability to hold governments, the media, and other stakeholders accountable. We also get to join with other groups, like NAMI and Shatterproof, in our community and nationally that are currently fighting stigma.

4. **Wide Wonder = stopping acts of harassment based on negative perceptions of those who use drugs.**

Law enforcement gets to stop harassing people who use drugs, such as through intimidation, unwarranted searches, unwarranted seizure of property, and racial profiling. Instead they get to focus on the social role of law enforcement by directing victims toward health and social services if they need them and simply issue warnings for those who do not experience problematic drug use but have disturbed public order by using drugs in public.

Jailing those who need medical and social support only makes social ills worse and does not discourage them. Law enforcement plays a major role in society's perceptions of those who use drugs. Working together with other drug policy stakeholders, law enforcement can address the perception-based character of criminalization and ensure the rule of law.

5. **Wide Wonder = putting health and safety first by strongly encouraging the medical community and healthcare professionals to be vocal in promoting evidence-based prevention, treatment, and harm-reduction services and to urgently address perception-based stigma in healthcare settings.**

Doctors, nurses, and other healthcare workers who are in contact with those with mental illnesses and who use drugs play a major role in changing perceptions. They are often the first point of contact for people who use drugs and can be influential in feeding evidence back to the public. As they are in a position of trust, they must play an important advocacy role in improving services for people with problematic drug use and mental illness. In particular, experienced healthcare professionals must be vocal in defending the usefulness of treatments that have proven effective - by speaking up in support of addiction medications, for example, which is still stigmatized by large portions of society.

