

# “There’s a War Going On”: How Nonprofits Understand the “Right” Way to Approach Addiction

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## Introduction and Guiding Questions

- In the late 20th century, a set of neuroethicists and public health scholars worked to redefine addiction as a “chronic relapsing brain disease.”

- Set in opposition to addiction as a moral condition

*“The gulf in implications between the ‘bad person’ view and the ‘chronic illness sufferer’ view is tremendous.”*

(Leshner, *Science* 1997)

- Others argue against the disease model, scientifically and morally

- Seen as further stigmatizing and damaging self-esteem

- Our research team’s guiding questions are:

- Do nonprofit organizations **infuse moral frameworks into their choice of approach** to the problem of addiction?
- **How do leaders** of nonprofit service and advocacy organizations differ in **their understanding of the “good” or “right” way to approach addiction?**

## Methods

- Mixed methods approach
- 30 interviews with nonprofit leaders
- Text data from 402 nonprofit Form 990 mission and programming statements
- Text mining of nonprofit administrative documents to reveal the ways (“topics”) that nonprofits discuss their views on the correct way to approach addiction.
- In-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted between August 2023 and January 2024.
- We did not ask directly about morality or the “right” way to approach addiction



# Nonprofits all adopt a **chronic disease model of addiction** but pursue three distinct **moral views** on the “correct” response:

**-Freedom from Addiction**

**-Improved Functioning**

**-Universal Dignity**

For more information, including information on our project that looks at declines in AmeriCorps Seniors volunteers, contact [ppaxton@prc.utexas.edu](mailto:ppaxton@prc.utexas.edu)



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## Results

### 15 Topics, including 8 Approaches:

Medication Assisted Treatment; Referred Treatment; Peer Informed Approaches; Mental Health Interventions; Residential Sobriety; Harm Reduction; Primary Prevention; Overdose Prevention and Awareness

### Disease Model is Ubiquitous:

- All interviewees talked about addiction as a “chronic disease”, a “pediatric onset disease”, or “like any other serious illness”
- 90% of nonprofit texts use words related to disease

### Instead, Three Distinct Moral Frameworks:

1. Freedom from Addiction: Self-Control and Abstinence
  - Goal: Never start, or be completely recovered

*So the idea that it's normal for kids to try drugs... When you say it's normal to use, **this is crazy**. But that's the way we think. And so we think about having tried to do it or to do it in a safer way, **that's not a good idea**. The good idea is not to use.*

Topics: Primary Prevention / Residential Sobriety

Frequent Words: youth, coalit\*, safe, sober, freedom, spirit\*

2. Improved Functioning: Client Treatment

- Goal: Rehabilitate, become a functioning adult, not in jail, employed

*If an individual is **living better**, they're living more responsibly, they're able to maintain employment, they're not homeless, they're **productive members of society**, then you know, so what if they have to take suboxone for the rest of their life?*

Topics: Medication Assisted Treatment / Referred Treatment

Frequent Words: methadone, reabilit\*, mainten\*, client

3. Universal Dignity: Harm Reduction

- Goal: Stay alive and safe even if not functioning

*But the truth is that if recovery isn't of interest to you, **that's okay** too and so we want to just keep you alive, and you **still deserve respect**, and you **still deserve life**,... even if you don't have a desire for recovery. If you want to continue using **that's great**. Let's just keep you safe.*

Topics: Overdose Prevention and Awareness / Harm Reduction

Frequent Words: naloxone\*, support, help, health, people, user