

# Public Health Model for Substance Abuse Prevention

## OVERVIEW

The focus of public health is on the health, safety and well-being of entire populations. A unique aspect of the approach is that it strives to provide the maximum benefit for the largest number of people.

Public health draws on a science base that is multi-disciplinary. It relies on knowledge from a broad range of disciplines including medicine, epidemiology, sociology, psychology, criminology, education, and economics. This broad knowledge base has allowed the field of public health to respond successfully to a range of health conditions across the globe.

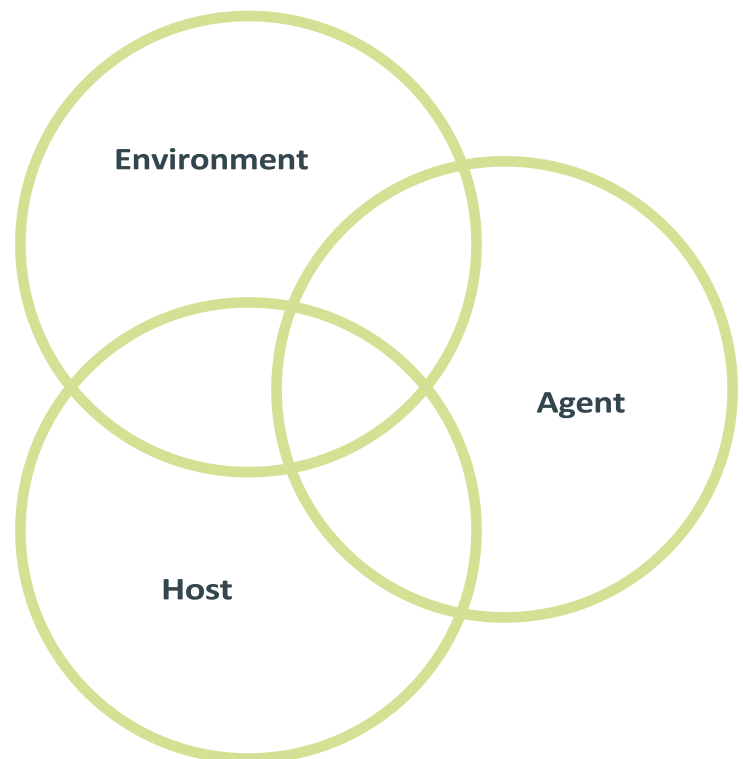
The public health approach also emphasizes input from diverse sectors including health, education, social services, justice, policy and the private sector. Collective action on the part of these stakeholders can help in addressing problems like substance misuse and abuse.

The Public Health Model embraces a comprehensive approach to community change. Instead of focusing efforts on changing individuals, one at a time through prevention efforts, this model looks at changing the environment that surrounds those individuals.

As the model suggests, a specific substance use problem does not result from only one source. Rather, the model emphasizes the interaction of sometimes subtle forces that shape the type and magnitude of problematic outcomes. The etiology of the specific problem can often be understood best from a public health perspective by isolating the relevant individual, agent, and environmental variables that are identified through the intervening variables and underlying conditions.

Intervening variables are the underlying factors that contribute to the problem and answer the question “Why here?”

Underlying conditions continue to drill down to the intervening variable to answer the question “But, why here?”



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## KEY CHARACTERISTICS

The focus of the public health model is a broad approach to improve individual and community health through the prevention and treatment of disease and other physical and mental health conditions by promoting healthy behaviors. Some examples include promotion of hand washing and breastfeeding, providing vaccinations, and distributing condoms to prevent the spread of sexually transmitted diseases.

The public health model seeks to not only change an individual's behavior, but to *understand* the impact the environmental context has in relation to encouraging or precipitating behavior. Using a disease prevention analogy, the public health model approaches an issue by understanding the interrelationship between the host (person) the agent or vector (substance) and the environment (place, situation, circumstances, relationships).

The public health approach influences prevention. The key characteristics of the approach are:

1. **Promotion and prevention** – which focuses on promoting wellness and preventing problems.
2. **Population based** – meaning that the focus is not on one individual but on the population that is affected or is at risk.
3. **Risk and protective factors** – draws connections between the risk and protective factors that influence individual behaviors.
4. **Multiple contexts** – embraces the understanding that individuals are influenced by different environments (or as defined in prevention – domains), such as family, neighborhood, school, community and culture.
5. **Development stages** – takes into consideration the developmental stages of the population at risk, and engages in deliberate, active & ongoing planning.

By analyzing the environment and its particular characteristics, and by understanding the relationship an environment, agent, and host have on each other – prevention professionals can better plan for effective prevention strategies to impact substance use.

### Sources:

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