Cognitive Behavioral Skills and Norms Clarification Programs for Alcohol Use by College Students

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When it comes to drinking and college students, the perception among many on campus is that they go together like ham and eggs. A brief review of the literature explores the relationship between perceptions of social norms with regard to drinking and actual drinking behavior. Many colleges and universities have explored interventions that utilize social norms feedback and norms clarification to challenge individual perceptions. While not 100% effective, these programs appear to show promise for reducing alcohol misuse within this population.

One national evaluation concluded that social norms marketing programs at several colleges that employed this type of intervention did not result in a decrease in alcohol usage, even when student exposure and length of program existence were considered. In fact, at these same schools, increases in measures of monthly alcohol use and total alcohol consumed were noted (Wechsler, Nelson, Lee, Seibring, Lewis, & Keeling, 2003). In short, the study did not find evidence to support the effectiveness of social norms marketing approaches in reducing alcohol use among college students, though it did suggest further research into using social norms marketing in conjunction with other approaches (Wechsler et al, 2003). The efficacy of social norms campaigns has been mixed. Although some social norms marketing interventions have been successful, predicted attitudinal and behavioral changes may not be found when applied
across different health topics (Cameron & Campo, 2006). With regard to gender, one difference in drinking attitude is that men reported more social pressure to drink and greater embarrassment about expressing drinking-related concerns; women expected more severe consequences if they drank excessively (Suls & Green, 2003). A recent New Zealand university study showed strong evidence of norm misperceptions, consistent with the results of several U.S. studies. Perceived norms are strongly related to individual drinking levels (Kypri & Langley, 2003).

College students’ drinking behavior is related to gender, type of living unit, personal attitudes toward drinking, and the degree of consistency/discrepancy between the individual student’s own attitude and his or her perception of the campus drinking norm. Students who view the campus norm to be similar to their own attitudes were found to drink more copiously, and in more public settings, than students with dissimilar attitudes and perceptions (Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986). Rimal (2008) found that successful norms-based interventions must 1) be able to persuade students that their perceptions about the prevalence of alcohol consumption are excessive – that actual consumption rates are lower than what students typically believe, and 2) show a significant relationship between descriptive norms and drinking behavior (taking into account social approval or disapproval from others, perceived benefits of consumption, affiliation with reference groups, and their own behavioral identity).

After controlling for individual characteristics such as age and gender, perceptions of peer drinking predicted alcohol use, which in turn predicted alcohol problems (Clapp & McDonnell, 2000). Students typically misperceive their peer norms
of alcohol (as well as other substances) use by substantially overestimating how often the average student used alcohol. Such misperceptions should be considered when designing college drug prevention programs (Perkins, Meilman, Leichliter, Cashin, & Presley, 1999). Regardless of the actual campus drinking norm, most students consistently overestimated the quantity of alcohol consumed by their peers. Students’ perception of their campus drinking norm was the strongest predictor of the amount of alcohol individually consumed in comparison with the influence of all other demographic variables. Perception of the drinking norm, not the actual campus norm, was also a much stronger predictor of alcohol use. In contrast, schools that exposed students to information with regard to drinking misperceptions among peers, experienced reduced levels of high-risk drinking and the negative consequences associated with them (Perkins, Haines, & Price, 2005).

Student peer norms appear to be the strongest influence on college students’ personal drinking behavior, greater than parental, faculty and RAs. The widespread prevalence among students of dramatic misperceptions of reduction of alcohol misuse in university and college students. For example, a 2009 study found that Web/computer feedback saw a significantly greater reduction in alcohol related problems than mailed feedback, individual face-to-face feedback, or group face-to-face feedback. Peak blood alcohol content, drinking frequency, drinking peer norms regarding drinking attitudes and behaviors result in a significant negative effect of promoting and exacerbating problem drinking. However, interventions designed to reduce these misperceptions have shown promise in several pilot studies (Perkins, 2002). The type of social norms intervention
may impact the level of success quantity, binge drinking, and shift in drinking norms were also significantly greater using Web/computer feedback processes (Moreira, Smith, & Foxcroft, 2009). Indeed, tailoring social norm drinking interventions to address specific aspects of drinking behavior, as well as monitoring both negative and positive effects of norm-based prevention messages may prove to be most efficacious (Werch, Pappas, Carlson, DiClemente, Chally & Sinder, 2000).

With regard to drinking control strategies and actual alcohol consumption among college students, strategies used while drinking were more effective than either selective avoidance of heavy drinking activities and situations, or, alternatives to drinking (Sugarman & Carey, 2007). Active, problem-oriented coping strategies appear to be more effective than avoidance strategies in the long run in reducing both alcohol consumption and negative consequences, but there does not appear to be a significant relationship between cognitive behavioral treatment and coping skills, at least for alcoholics in treatment (Litt, Kadden, Cooney, & Kabela, 2003).
References


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