

Alcohol Use Perception

Background

College students have the misperception that they drink much more than they actually do. Research bears this out (Baer & Carney, 1993; Baer, Stacy & Larimer, 1991; Borsari & Carey, 1999; Perkins, 2003). Borsari & Carey conclude that:

- In the university-drinking environment, students tend to overestimate the amount that their friends drink.
- Students tend to perceive that their friend's attitudes toward alcohol are more permissive than they really are.
- Individuals also appear to generalize inappropriately about their peers' drinking behaviors on the basis of observing a few peers engaging in heavy drinking episodes.
- The perceived alcohol norms of one's social group can influence individual group members' drinking decisions.
- One consequence of such norm overestimation is that individuals are less likely to question their own drinking if they think those around them are drinking more or have more permissive attitudes.
- Another consequence is that when a person overestimates a certain behavior, the likelihood that he or she will engage in that behavior also increases.
- Without exposure to the more normative levels of alcohol consumption of other groups, people may be unable to evaluate their own levels of drinking objectively.

Go to K:\Web Content 2004\hp_alcohol misperception factors.doc for a fuller explanation of what tends to boost misperception.

Objective:

Aid students in realizing that their perception of alcohol use on campus may be greater than it actually is.

Session starters (use one)

- Share a personal story where either you or a friend had one perception of a person only to find out that the perception was incorrect. Maybe a friend of yours met another friend of yours and had a negative view that was warranted. However you knew that this was abnormal behavior for that person, and you tried to explain his or her behavior was not typical of them and then speculated on why they acted the way they did. (Has this ever happened between one of your friends and your parents?)
- Talk about how we view some famous people. Some we have had a positive view of but then when one negative behavior was shown, then it turned the public's view of them. Was this turning really justified, or did it just show the person to be human and that it was a small blip in that person's life? Are we usually more forgiving of people that we like, so that if a friend of yours did something pretty bad that you'd probably see the behavior as abnormal (and that unusual circumstances probably aided in that bad decision), where if someone you didn't like did the same thing, you'd just attribute it to "that's who they are!"
- If you can't think of a personal example, perhaps you can use this. A dietitian was working with a man one day who wanted to lose some weight. She was trying to help

him make gradual changes in his lifestyle such as increasing exercise activity and modifying his diet to include eating healthier. (Often people can begin to lose weight by making such subtle changes as drinking (or eating) one less soda, one less candy bar a day, etc.) In this particular case the dietitian asked the man how many sodas he drank a day. He replied two. She asked if he would be willing to give up one soda each day. He said, "absolutely not!" She tried to find out what was another thing, then, that would be a trade off to the calories he was getting from drinking soda. While inquiring further, she found out that when the man meant a soda, he meant a two-liter. This man, on average, was drinking 4 liters of soda a day. That's a lot of calories. Begin a discussion using the following questions. How many of you drink this much soda in a day? What do you think is an average soda consumption for an individual per day? How many of you rarely drink soda? How many of you think you drink a lot of soda, compared, to say, your friends? Do you think that this man thought what he was doing was normal? What if he had kids and his children grew up in an environment seeing this type of use? Do you think they would think this is normal soda consumption? If all you saw was this type of use, you may assume that such use was normal, and that about everybody drank this much.

Session

- Report that according to the 2004 NC State CORE Survey, "Most NC State students have 0-4 when they party. Better still, if you have a poster with this information, show it to them. Ask them:

"Do you believe this? Why or why not?"

Many will not believe this statistic. You may not believe it yourself. After all, there is a misperception that more drinking is taking place than actually is and things we think to be true, when challenged, usually meet with resistance! Please use the background material above to give an explanation of why this statistic could possibly be true. Some of the top reasons given to dispute the 0-4 figure that you may hear:

1. "People lie." They don't want others to know how much they drink. It may be true that a certain percentage of people will lie on about any survey. However, there will be a certain percentage that will over report consumption as well just to try to skew the statistics. The most recent survey done was done anonymously. No names. People didn't have to participate if they didn't want to. They could leave any question they didn't feel comfortable answering blank. You may wish to ask the group if they typically lie when completing an anonymous survey. It is human nature to think that people must be lying if they are reporting something different than what we think we know to be true.
2. "This is not my experience." Explore their experience. Is their experience true, or do they just assume that most people are drinking more than 4 drinks? Do they count the number of drinks others are having? If so, do they do so for everyone at a function or just for their friends? If they really know how much their friends drink, but not how much others have had, do they assume others drink like them, or do they think others drink more or less than their group? Point out that we often think our experiences are true for

others when that may not be the case. For example, if a student religious group experienced little to no alcohol use and made the assumption that others drink like it did, it would be wrong. If a heavy-drinking fraternity group made the assumption that it were normal, it would be wrong, too. There are many, many drinking behaviors on campus, and in the 2004 NC State CORE Survey, 21% reported that they had not used any alcohol within the last year. Point out that since most students think that students drink more than they actually do, that those who are in the 0-4 range don't usually go out of their way to show their use/nonuse, as they think their use is abnormal. Thus, they may try to make others think they are consuming more than they actually are. For example, some students have reported that they show different brands of beer in their possession to make others think they are drinking more, when in fact they have hardly drunk any from the cans in their possession. Why would they do this? To make themselves appear that they are a part of the perceived norm. In fact, they are the normal ones! Some people will appear drunk who aren't!

- Ask the group to consider that perhaps the statistic is more right than they believe it to be. Challenge them when they are out at functions where drinking takes place to check out their assumptions.

References

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