

Harm Reduction Interventions With Alcohol-Consuming Middle and Late Adolescents

A review of the video



Harm Reduction With High School Students

with Mary E. Larimer

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Reviewed by

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Alcohol use and abuse among high school students is a problem that is demanding more of the attention of practitioners because many adolescent alcohol drinkers, particularly within social contexts, are binge drinkers (Stewart, 2002). Mason and Windle (2002), Stewart (2002), and Perry, Williams, Komro, and Veblen-Mortenson (2002) have collectively asserted that an ecological level of analysis conceptualization of the alcohol use and abuse problem among adolescents is essential in gaining a keener appreciation of the impact of

familial, institutional, and environmental variables on underage alcohol access and its subsequent use and abuse.

This APA video focuses on harm reduction interventions with high school students and is a logical extension of the aforementioned work. Harm reduction, according to Mary Larimer of the University of Washington at Seattle, is a way of managing risk behavior that is both pragmatic and nonjudgmental. Adolescents will experiment and use alcohol particularly within social settings. Alcohol, if not used in moderation, has the potential of being abused. It is not productive to use shame or guilt as a strategy to reduce or eliminate the use of alcohol from the adolescent's behavioral repertoire. Instead, it is far more advantageous to provide adolescents with information and problem-solving strategies that empower them to make more informed decisions concerning their alcohol use in the future. At the core of harm reduction interventions is the combined work of G. Alan Marlatt (1996, 1998) and Bill Miller (Miller & Rollnick, 2002; Miller & Munoz, 2005) in their focus on motivational interviewing approaches in the treatment of alcohol-abusing clients. Through personalized feedback in addition to an appreciation of self-regulatory processes, motivational interviewing approaches focus on alcohol use and abuse through the incorporation of relapse prevention strategies as an inevitable part of behavioral change modalities. It is presumed from the outset that for most adolescents, there will be a discrepancy between what their behavior is like at a particular moment and what they would like their alcohol behavior to be like in the future.

How does a practitioner move an adolescent along in this process? The clinician's approach is to be nonjudgmental and acknowledge the adolescent's personal choice in reaching the decision to change his or her behaviors. The clinician should also provide information to the adolescent following the completion of a number of assessment instruments in a 30-minute assessment session focusing on the adolescent's alcohol intake and frequency of use (e.g., his or her blood alcohol levels in the recent past, the positive and negative

consequences of alcohol consumption on his or her physical and psychological functioning in the recent past, and the positive and negative benefits of alcohol consumption).

In the video, a case demonstration of harm-reduction approaches with high school students focuses on a rather compliant 17-year-old, Euro-American, upper middle-class, male high school senior living in the Midwest who is experiencing some difficulties as a result of his alcohol consumption during weekend social events with his peers. This adolescent client has a history of alcoholism in his family, and he is concerned about his younger brother's potential to use and abuse alcohol given the client's current levels of alcohol consumption during the weekend. The harm reduction intervention by Dr. Larimer provides this adolescent client with information about his alcohol consumption based on his 30-minute assessment session and explores his expectancies and expectations surrounding his alcohol use and sometimes abuse (e.g., bingeing). The focus of this harm reduction intervention is to empower this adolescent client with information so he can make an informed choice of what steps, if any, he would like to take in the future to modify his alcohol consumption. This intervention does not result in the adolescent male making the decision to modify his alcohol consumption at this point.

It is hoped that future case presentations demonstrating the effectiveness of harm reduction approaches with high school students will incorporate more ethnically and culturally diverse adolescent clients. This video is a valuable addition to practitioners-in-training in school psychology, marital and family therapy, counseling psychology, and psychiatric social work training programs as well as seasoned professionals desiring to broaden their repertoire of behavioral change interventions within the context of substance use and abuse treatment with middle and late adolescents.

References

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