

Best Practices

Social Norms

Description

Social norms theory states that much of people's behavior is influenced by their perception of how other members of their social group behave. According to social norms theory, people tend to misperceive, i.e., exaggerate, the negative health behavior of their peers. If people think harmful behavior is typical, they are more likely to engage in that type of behavior.

All too often, perceptions are incorrect. If unhealthy behavior is perceived to be the standard in a social group, the social urge to conform will negatively affect overall behavior of group members. Alternatively, by educating a group about healthy behavior that is in fact the usual practice among their peers, behavior can be affected in a positive manner.

Social norms is an environmental approach that seeks to impact social and cultural environments as the way to then influence individuals. It has been widely applied using social marketing techniques. Normative messages are designed for delivery using various media and promotion strategies in order to effectively reach a target population and promote its accurate norms of health and safety. Social norms theory has also been successfully applied through other strategies such as curriculum infusion, creating press coverage, policy development, and small group interventions.

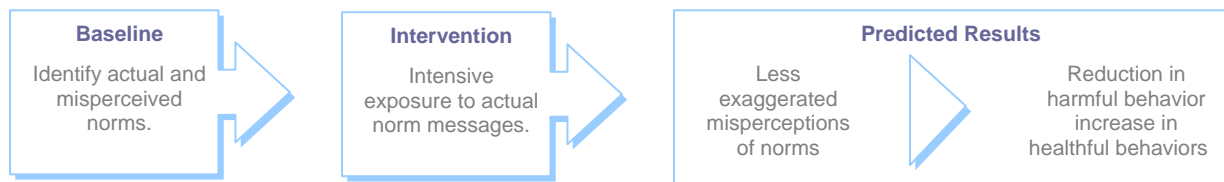
The Main Frame

Strategy

Essentially, the strategy of the social norms approach is to gather credible data from a target population and then, using various health communication strategies, consistently tell it the truth about its actual norms of health, protection, and the avoidance of risk behaviors. With repeated exposure to a variety of positive, data-based messages, the misperceptions that help to sustain problem behavior are reduced, and a greater proportion of the population begins to act in accord with the more accurately perceived norms of health, protection, and safety.

Michael Haines, Social Norms Resource Center

Social Norms Approach to Health Promotion



(Source :Perkins 2003)

Research

A review of the literature reveals numerous research findings that strongly suggest that the social norms approach is an appropriate strategy for targeting the full range of substance use in secondary education. Studies have shown that the overestimation of peer alcohol and cigarette use is widespread among students of middle and high school age (Perkins and Craig, 2003; Botvin et al, 2001; D'Amico et al., 2001; Sussman et al., 1988; Thombs, Wolcott, and Farkash, 1997; Beck and Treiman, 1996).

Other research has found that overestimation of peer use is a significant predictor of adolescent cigarette and alcohol use (D'Amico et al, 2001; Botvin et al., 2001; Graham, Marks, and Hansen, 1991), and that adolescent onset of use can be significantly delayed by reducing misperceptions of alcohol and cigarette use among peers (Haines, Barker, Rice, 2003; Linkenbach and Perkins, 2003; Perry et al., 1992; Hansen and Graham, 1991). There are over fifty (50) published studies documenting the misperception of peer norms for a variety of substances and behaviors. Berkowitz (2004), Perkins (2003), and Borsari and Carey (2003). There are at over twenty published studies in which misperceptions are positively correlated with drinking behavior or predict how individuals drink (Beck & Trieman, 1996; Botvin, et al, 2001; Clapp & McDonnell, 2000; D'Amico et al, 2001; Korcuska & Thombs, 2003; Kypri & Langley, 2003; Lewis & Neighbors, forthcoming; Marks et al, 1992; Mattern & Neighbors, 2004; Page et al, 1999; Perkins, 1985, 1987; Perkins & Wechsler, 1996; Prentice & Miller, 1993; Scher et al, 2001; Steffian, 1999; Thombs, 1999; Thombs et al, 1997; Trockel et al, 2003).

Outcomes

In studies of high school and middle school populations, perceptions of norms have accurately predicted behavior change at a later point in time. Thus, Two years after a multi-component controlled middle school-based intervention to reduce high-risk drinking, accurate perception of peer norms was the only outcome variable associated with continued reductions in high-risk drinking (Botvin, et al, 2001) In a literature review of effective school-based prevention programs, Hansen (1985) concluded that "after one year alcohol use was significantly reduced among students who received any of the programs that included a normative beliefs component" while "students who did not receive a normative beliefs component... increased their alcohol use as if no intervention had occurred" *Evaluation and outcome data on two high school projects (Delcalb / Sycamore and Evanston are available on the National Social Norms Resource Center website in the case studies section.*



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