

RM 3–SU: From Experimenting to Dependency in 43 Seconds*

Teaching High School Students about the Progression of Alcoholism

Simply giving young people the facts about substance use and abuse is not a very effective prevention tool by itself. It has been shown that long-lasting behaviour change is more related to internalizing concepts than just to the simple intake of facts. Education guidelines generally reinforce the fact that when students have the opportunity to internalize or personalize learning – to realize how it can affect their lives – they are more likely to show changes in behaviour.

To promote behaviour change, one needs to blend both facts and feelings into the decision-making process. Young people need opportunities to practise their decision-making skills, beginning with exploring their feelings in a safe environment, so they can then apply these skills in more risky situations.

Young people readily understand the fact that using and abusing alcohol and other drugs can lead to serious health and emotional problems. Unfortunately, their belief in their own invincibility convinces them that these problems will never happen to them.

In the following experiential learning activity, which is designed to engage students in a discussion about alcohol, students learn information about alcohol and begin to explore their feelings about its effects in a safe environment. Alcohol was chosen as the medium because of the common adolescent misperception that alcohol is not a very harmful substance. Exploring feelings is important in the decision-making process, and this learning activity is a beginning step toward that goal. The affective impact of this learning activity is what makes it a powerful learning experience.

Learning Activity

Give each student one packet of 12 slips of paper. A letter-size sheet of paper folded in thirds like a business letter, then folded in half, and then folded in half again will produce 12 equal slips of paper. Assure students that they are the only ones who will see their slips of paper. Then give the following instructions:

- On three slips of paper write the names of three separate people who are very dear to you.
- On three slips of paper write three things or possessions that you regard as special.
- On three slips of paper write three different activities in which you enjoy participating.
- On three slips of paper write three personal attributes of which you are proud.

Continued

* Source: Kolaya, Linda, and Barb Grimes-Smith. "From Experimenting to Dependency in 43 Seconds: Teaching Junior High and High School Students about the Progression of Alcoholism." *Journal of Health Education* 30.3 (May/June 1999): 185, 189. Adapted with permission. Permission is granted by the American Association for Health Education/American Alliance for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance which owns and publishes the *American Journal of Health Education*.

RM 3–SU: From Experimenting to Dependency in 43 Seconds (*Continued*)

Instruct students to hold the slips of paper in their hands like playing cards. Tell them that you want to walk them through a few different scenarios related to the papers they just filled out. Read the scenarios below to the class, and follow the instructions provided in parentheses.

Scenarios

1. You have been invited to a party. You came home late, after curfew, smelling of alcohol. Your parents are waiting up for you. You're in big trouble! One of your possessions is taken away as punishment. You must choose which one. (Give participants 15 seconds to choose one possession and tear up the slip of paper.)
2. After a Friday night football game you and a friend go to a mutual friend's house. His or her parents aren't at home and there is beer available. You decided to drink quite a bit. The next morning you have a hangover and don't feel well and are not able to participate in or enjoy one of your favourite activities. Tear up one activity and one attribute. (Give participants 10 seconds to choose and tear up the slips of paper.)
3. Drinking has become one of your favourite pastimes. You are now looking forward to drinking every weekend. You feel you can handle it—it's not a problem. Tear up one person's name and one attribute. (Give participants 8 seconds to do this.)
4. You now find yourself drinking daily, with serious consequences: suspension from school, stealing money, fighting with parents. Tear up one person's name and one attribute. (Give participants 5 seconds to choose.)
5. After a weekend of partying, on your way home you are picked up for driving under the influence (DUI) of alcohol. Tear up one possession and one activity. (Give participants 5 seconds to choose. Then have them turn over their last three slips of paper.)
6. You are experiencing total loss of control over your use of alcohol. Without looking or discussing, remove and tear up two slips of paper from someone sitting near you.
7. You will end up with only one slip of paper.

Continued

RM 3–SU: From Experimenting to Dependency in 43 Seconds *(Continued)*

Processing the Learning Activity

Ask students the following questions:

- How did you feel as this activity progressed?
- How did you feel as the speed and tempo of the activity increased?
- What were the easiest items to give up? What were the most difficult items to give up?
- What was your reaction to having the last two slips of paper taken from you?
- How do you feel about the one item you have left?

Explain to students that as they went through the progression activity, they experienced the loss of control, just as though they were experiencing the stages of alcoholism. Talk about the stages of progression: experimentation, regular use, daily preoccupation, and dependency.

Talk about why young people progress through this addiction process faster than adults do. Two reasons are

- body physiology – organs are still maturing even after reaching full body growth
- patterns of use – binge drinking, multiple drug use

Ask students what could be done to regain some of the losses. Suggestions might include the following:

- Talk to someone (e.g., counsellor, school nurse, trusted adult).
- Get help (e.g., from Alcoholics Anonymous, community agency, treatment facility).

Conclusion

Approaching the subject of substance use and abuse with young people can be very tricky. Many young people already know a lot about alcohol and its effects, but they may not understand why they are much more vulnerable than adults are to the psychological and physical risks associated with alcohol use. This learning activity was designed to present facts while letting young people explore their feelings in a safe environment, and to help them understand how alcohol can affect their lives.