

RM 6–SU: Techniques for Challenging Individual Risk Perception*

The purpose of this learning strategy is to allow students to assess their own risk perception for specific behaviours and to learn that their actions can have both short- and long-term consequences.

Risk Continua

Risk continua can be used for a variety of content areas in the classroom. For this learning experience, students can use the risk continuum to discuss risks associated with alcohol use, tobacco use, prescription drug use, and illegal drug use, consumer health, violence, and so on (see Content Areas and Risk Continuum).

| Content Areas and Risk Continuum | | | |
|----------------------------------|--------------------------------|---|-------------------|
| Alcohol use | Abstainer | ↔ | Binge drinking |
| Tobacco use | Abstainer | ↔ | Frequent smoker |
| Prescription drug use | Abstainer | ↔ | Abuser/addict |
| Illegal drug use | Abstainer | ↔ | Addict/criminal |
| Violence | Conflict resolution | ↔ | Abusive behaviour |
| Consumer health | Listening to a health educator | ↔ | TV talk show |

Types of Risk

Before introducing the risk continuum, discuss the concepts of relative risk and risk taking.

- Ask students to think of examples of **helpful risks** and **harmful risks**. Write all the helpful risks on one side of the whiteboard and all the risks viewed as potentially harmful on the other side of the whiteboard (see Types of Risk). This can help students see that there are always risks in life, and that while some risks are health promoting, others are health prohibiting.
- At this time, discuss whether risk can vary, depending on whether the behaviour occurs only once or whether it is habitual. For example, does binge drinking lead to the negative health consequences associated with long-term bingeing? Is smoking occasionally a risk factor for respiratory problems?

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| Types of Risk | |
|--|--|
| Helpful Risks | Harmful Risks |
| Starting a relationship | Trying drugs |
| Learning to ski | Smoking cigarettes |
| Starting a new job | Selling drugs |
| Participating in class | Drinking and driving |
| Beginning to exercise | Unhealthy relationships |
| Declining to participate in a harmful risk | Becoming part of a questionable peer group |

- Next, ask students to assess the various types of consequences for risk taking. These include physical risks, social risks, emotional risks, and legal risks (see Risks Associated with Drinking Alcohol). Also tell students that health-related behaviours can have both short- and long-term consequences. With drug use, for example, the physical risks may include increased anxiety, sleepiness, abnormal vital signs, and irritability, which would be classified as long-term physical risks. Social risks may include social alienation and loss of friends. Emotional risks may include fighting with parents or friends about drug use. Legal risks may include problems associated with theft or trafficking.

| Risks Associated with Drinking Alcohol | | |
|--|--------------------------------|--------------------------|
| Physical risk | Cirrhosis | Long-term risk |
| Social risk | Impaired judgement | Short-term risk |
| Emotional risk | Increased depression/ violence | Short- or long-term risk |
| Legal risk | Driving while intoxicated | Short- or long-term risk |

Risk Perception

After discussing the concept of risk related to health topics, have students examine risk perception and risk behaviour by viewing specific behaviours or scenarios on a risk continuum ranging from **not at all risky** to **very risky**.

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1. Divide the class into two or three groups, depending on class size. Give each group a set of identical index cards with specific health behaviours written on each card. The behaviours should vary in degree of risk from not at all risky to very risky. Each card will have a different health behaviour written on it. Provide each student in each group with a card so that everyone can participate. It is also good to generate discussion by adding behaviours that may be ambiguous in terms of risk. (For example, when using a risk continuum on drug use behaviours, one card may read “drinking while on a date.” Although the example may not be an obvious risk factor, it typically results in a good discussion of how drinking may impair reasoning ability related to risky sexual behaviours.) Next, instruct each group of students to form a line from least risky to most risky behaviour, without allowing the other groups to see what order they have developed. Finally, have the groups stand across from each other so that they can easily compare the order of their cards. Discuss the rationale and any differences in order among the groups.
2. Have students form groups and supply them with index cards. Provide groups with health-related topics already addressed in class, and have them find sources of information for their assigned topics. Ask each group to create its own risk continuum by writing a source of health information on each blank index card provided. Again, remind students that they should have sources of information that vary from not risky at all to very risky. An example of a risky source of information may be television talk shows or advertisements, whereas a safe source may be a health educator or a health professional. Ask students to include some controversial or debatable sources of information, such as family members. When this is completed, have groups present their risk continua to the class and discuss whether the students agree with the order of the cards, and explain why or why not.

The benefit of having students create their own cards is that the teacher is able to assess learning by examining the accuracy of the content and whether risk perception is being demonstrated accurately. Additionally, students may come up with risk behaviours or scenarios that the teacher would likely miss. Risk continua also enable the teacher to correct misperceptions in risk perception, regardless of who creates them.