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Working with Youth Groups on Alcohol Prevention

Youth are considered a vital part of issues pertaining to alcohol. Though most young people do not use alcohol, they are susceptible to the influences of advertising and social learning under which they may be more likely to initiate the use of this substance. The direct and indirect promotions and advertisements of the alcohol industry targets the youth to attract as new consumers for their products. The same could be said of illicit drug dealers. It is therefore essential that the youth group of the community be involved as a vital component of prevention activities. As young people are generally energetic and enthusiastic and could easily be educated and motivated towards action, building their capacity to take on leadership in action against the promotion of alcohol would be a great resource for prevention efforts.

Until recently, preventive education on alcohol and drug use for youth has been a didactic process. In the past, it was expected that young people when told what to do, would obediently behave in an appropriate manner and refrain from using alcohol. While this approach has been proved ineffective and even counterproductive, preventive education has now moved away from it seeking new ways of tackling the issue of substance use among youth. There is a general agreement that one-time special events that only give away factual information on the ill effects, through fear tactics or testimonials of former addicted persons, are not very effective prevention strategies. However, for a considerable period these have been the main bases for the prevention of alcohol or drug use.

An effective strategy in introducing interesting and long term prevention programmes within the community is to form a group of youth volunteers whose main task is to organize and conduct community level prevention activities. The groups should consist of female and male members who are able to meet regularly and are dedicated and committed to their common cause. Prevention programmes for youth should focus on demystifying and deglamourizing alcohol and the settings of its use. A better impact can be achieved if the activities of the youth group could be integrated with community level prevention activities. The youth group activities should be planned in a way that youth are guided towards the self realization that the actual experience of using alcohol is unpleasant and uncomfortable. It is also important that the youth are educated on how the use of alcohol is made pleasurable through the process of conditioning. In order to change the attitudes of youth towards alcohol use, it is necessary to identify factors that promote it. This is a very useful exercise that enables one to remove the effects of extraneous factors that are associated with alcohol as it would guide non-users to better understand the chemical effects of the substance and how its use has been made pleasurable through these extraneous factors.

More often than not, youth tend to find the idea of challenging any kind of traditional norms and beliefs exciting. Taking this into account, youth could be made aware that the idea that the chemical effects of alcohol are enjoyable is in fact based on common social beliefs as is the attractive image of alcohol. In this way, challenging the existing beliefs on alcohol could be presented as fun. Youth could take up the

challenge to falsify the misconceptions of the image of alcohol as part of their daily routine. Furthermore, they could get involved in activities that would prevent the promotion of alcohol or drug use. For example, youth could avoid wearing T-shirts with promotional messages that not only encourage alcohol use but by doing so also insult the sport itself. Similarly, the youth clubs and sport clubs could be urged to refrain from accepting any sponsorship from the companies that sell alcohol. Youth should gradually be made to understand that parties and other festivities could be more enjoyable without the use of alcohol. The non-users at these occasions experience no discomfort and unpleasant situations as a result of the behaviour of the users. Youth should also be guided to observe the behaviour of users at festivals and other celebrations noting that the users, rather than actually enjoying themselves, are in reality only pretending to do so. They could expose this to the users by speaking to them directly and openly asking them to express their actual experiences after drinking alcohol.

Youth Participation

Most youth get attracted to and initiate the use of alcohol use at special and happy occasions such as parties. Thereafter, they would continue to use alcohol at various other occasions at different stages of their lives as shown in the diagram below. A person who initiates alcohol use during friendly encounters with others would continue to use alcohol for a considerable period and thereafter would not be able to enjoy a friendly gathering without it. In the same way, alcohol use would become associated with other occasions and events with similar consequences. As a result, over a period of time more and more ordinary activities would become associated with alcohol use and users would eventually become less able to live normally and enjoy life. Hence, alcohol use would become an obstacle to young people, impairing their ability to enjoy their life fully.

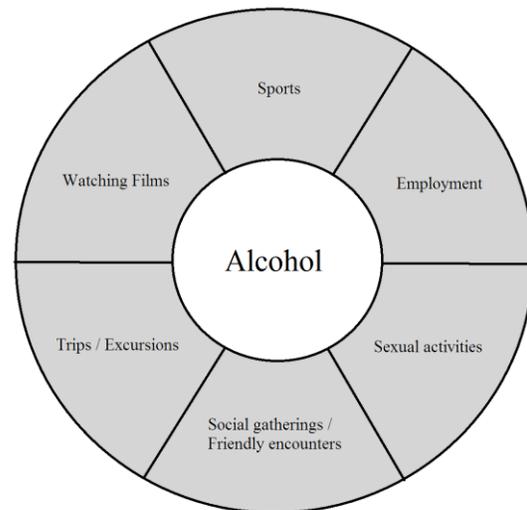


Fig.5: How Alcohol Becomes the Main Focal Point in the Life of an Alcohol Dependent Individual

Youth have the responsibility and the ability to challenge and correct, wrongly held expectancies and incorrect practices in a society. They must take a leading role in creating a better social background for the overall development of their community. They must also be aware that the alcohol industry and dealers persistently target the children by portraying alcohol use as an act of the high society, deceiving young people in order to make more money.

It is also important that youth become aware and make others aware that by falling prey to these tactics of the alcohol industry and dealers, children and young people are in danger of becoming completely dependent on alcohol. As shown in Fig. 5, should alcohol dependence, once it occurs during adolescence or youth, continue into adulthood, alcohol would eventually occupy a central part in the user's life, casting all other activities into a subordinate position so that his/her life is completely governed by alcohol. By increasing awareness on these long term consequences of alcohol use, it would be possible to prevent children and young people from becoming dependent on the substance.

Formal youth organizations include youth clubs, cricket and other sporting teams, bands, as well as troupes of actors and dancers. There are also informal youth groups such as groups of friends and other special groups that are collectively involved in organizing religious or social functions. Connecting with youth through both formal organizations and informal groups and getting them involved in alcohol and drug prevention activities gives them valuable life experiences that could improve their creativity and the ability to meet challenges.

Prevention Messages

As mentioned earlier, using alcohol is in reality, an unpleasant experience. It becomes pleasant not due to its chemical effects, but due to the flawed values attributed to it by society. In other words, it becomes attractive due to environmental factors rather than to chemical effects. Therefore, in preventing alcohol use, it is important to recognize the subtle effects of these social and environmental factors that make it fun and enjoyable.

One way in which youth may learn to perceive alcohol as attractive is if they witness a famous, much admired person, such as a celebrity, consuming alcohol. Similarly, in situations where the majority uses alcohol, many young people may find it humiliating to avoid using alcohol. In such a situation, even one who finds the use of alcohol to be unpleasant or unentertaining would be compelled to pretend otherwise in order to avoid humiliation. In such instances, the perceived unpleasantness of not using alcohol would far outweigh the actual unpleasantness of the effects of alcohol. Furthermore, those who claim to be more experienced in alcohol use would exaggerate the positive expectancies surrounding it and the falsely perceived benefits of using it thereby exerting more pressure on the non-users to consume the substance. Even those who as a habit do not consume alcohol often have no choice but to participate in activities that would encourage alcohol use such as giving company to the users and being amused by their absurd behaviour.

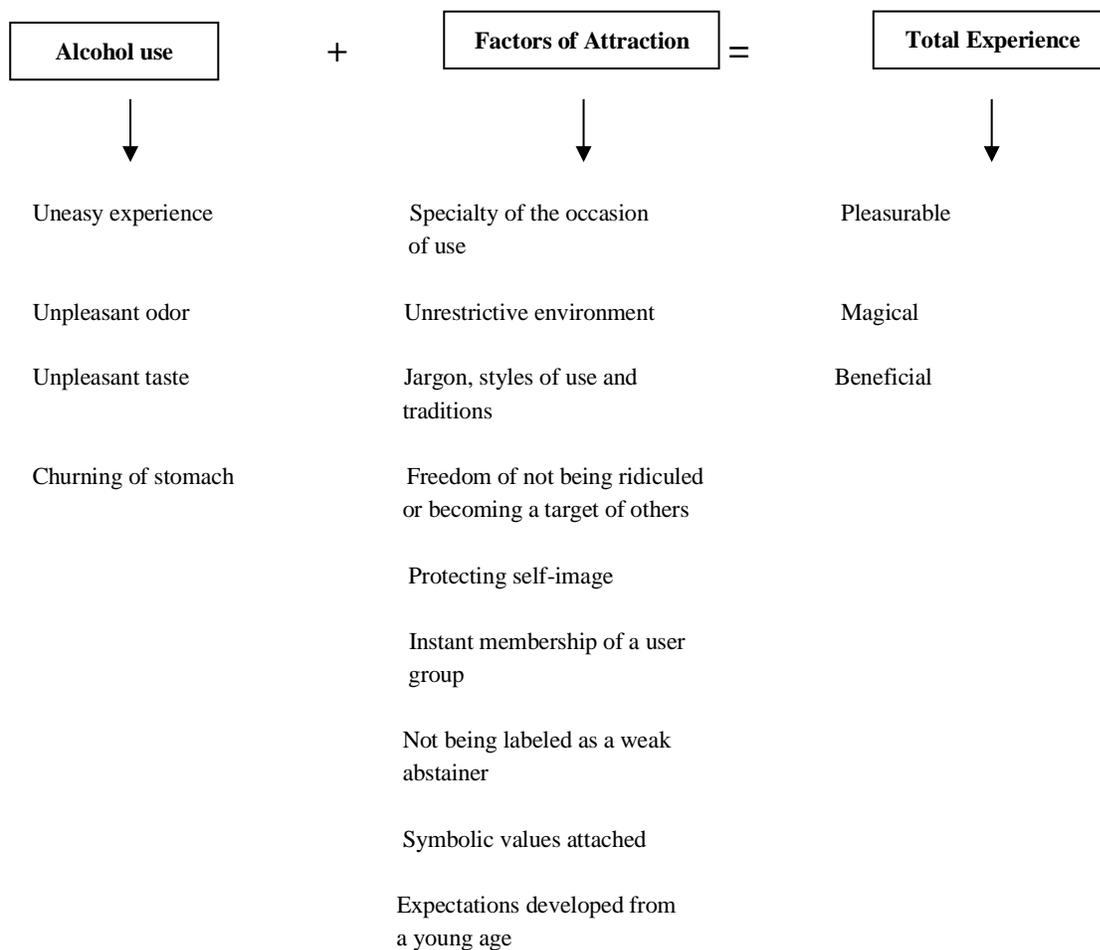


Fig. 6: How Factors that Make Alcohol Attractive Influence the Way in Which Alcohol Is Perceived

The use of alcohol is often initiated at meetings with peer groups and continued due to the abovementioned factors that make it pleasant and attractive. Conditioning over an extended period of time transforms these substances into symbols of happiness. For example, youth may feel energized and elated at mere sight of a bottle of alcohol and may attribute the cheerful mood prevailing at casual meetings with peers to alcohol.

Young people, who initially associate alcohol with happy occasions would, over a period of time, learn to believe that no special occasion would be cheerful without alcohol. Following prolonged conditioning, they may find themselves unable to enjoy any special event without alcohol. Similarly, they may gradually lose the ability to perform other processes that normally occur unaided, such as sleeping and eating, if alcohol is not available. It can then be understood that getting accustomed to the use of alcohol seriously limits the normal capabilities of individuals. It is important to guide youth towards understanding this fact as well as the fact that just as the initiation of alcohol use restricts the abilities of individuals, refraining from alcohol use enables one to think freely and logically thereby maximizing the level of contentment in life.

A Few Approaches to Avoid when Working with Youth

When working on alcohol prevention with youth, there are several points that need to be taken into consideration. Taking a stance that strongly opposes alcohol is not advisable as it risks giving the impression that the main objective of the programme is to stop “someone’s use”, which in turn would not be appealing to young people. Similarly, puritan or moral approaches or using fear tactics have been proven ineffective, and even counterproductive. Alcohol prevention approaches should not be limited to mere lecturers and seminars. Similarly, activities like protest marches or walks have little effect on changes in behavior and are therefore of little value.

Reducing the Attractiveness of Alcohol

As mentioned in the previous sections, the attractive image built around alcohol or drugs motivates young people to initiate the use. Members of the youth group should then question the basis for alcohol use and judge irrational acts committed by users while under the influence of alcohol. The youth group must understand and educate others that these acts are committed consciously and that the persons committing such acts should not be permitted or pardoned.

Parties and excursions are in themselves fun-filled and enjoyable regardless of whether or not alcohol is present. The same is true of meetings with relatives or friends and the end of examinations. Any person would enjoy such occasions whether or not he/she is an alcohol user and it is noteworthy that the enjoyment at such occasions is derived from environmental factors related to the occasions rather than from the alcohol consumed at them. However, it is often at these very occasions that alcohol use is initiated, especially by young people. It is vital that the young of the community be made aware that those who initiate alcohol use get trapped in the clutches of the industry or of traffickers and spend the rest of their lives miserably. The youth group and through them, the other young people within the community should be brought to a level that they are able to boldly state the view that the "fun" at a party is not derived from alcohol and to clarify the fact that alcohol is in no way connected to their merry and joyous nature. They should be enabled to recognize any attempts to glorifying the use of alcohol through interpersonal communications as well as print and electronic media and work towards exposing these as lures that attract and trap people, especially youth, in a vicious cycle that is difficult to escape.

There is also the widespread misconception that having consumed alcohol, a person could engage in unacceptable behaviour without restrictions. For example, laughing or crying loudly in a way that is disturbing to others is considered unacceptable when done by a person who is sober but will be excused if done by a person who is under the influence of alcohol. There are other misconceptions in society that cast alcohol in a positive light such as the idea that those who consume alcohol are cheerful, amiable and open minded and that those who do not use alcohol are weak, timid and incapable of achieving much in life. These misconceptions are very strong, so much so that many youth are motivated to gradually become alcohol users solely based on them. It is therefore important to motivate the youth group to

challenge the misconceptions surrounding alcohol and expose the fact that users have in fact curtailed their wellbeing and become trapped in the snares of the alcohol industry and vendors and that those who do not use alcohol are more likely to enjoy life to the fullest. The youth group should be capacitated to encourage non-users to convey subtle messages to the users that alcohol is in no way connected to their behaviour and that they (the users) are able engage in the same behaviour even without using alcohol. In other words non-users should be immunized against the advertising and marketing strategies used by the industry to create and spread misconceptions regarding alcohol. The statements such as the following are examples of how alcohol use is promoted in day to day life. It is important that youth understand and work towards correcting these wrong notions:

- “Drinkers are good hearted fellows”
- “What is wrong if someone had a drink occasionally?”
- “When he is drunk, he is like a bird”
- “When he is drunk, he is like a child”
- “Isn’t it manly to drink? So what's wrong with that?”

Another task of the youth would be to train other young people to negate or “deflate” these irrational statements and oppose them either through humour or by expressing disagreement through non-verbal cues. This could be done by directly challenging the actual alcohol experience. For example, the statement “our guys had a drink yesterday” could be challenged with a statement such as “you mean that you guys drank alcohol? Doesn’t it stink?” Similarly, the statement “I had too much of drink” could be challenged with a statement such as “you mean your body is aching? What a pity!”

Youth could observe the antics used by users to cover up the unpleasant experiences and neutralize them through activities such as:

- Boo the users when they raise their glasses to cheer
- Ask for the actual physical feeling of the alcohol user when he is consuming the drink
- Ask why bites are eaten when drinking alcohol (Isn’t it to cover up or reduce the unpleasantness of its taste?)
- Refraining from laughing at the silly antics of those who are intoxicated
- Users who have not yet fully abandoned the use of alcohol but are in the process of doing so may question other users on the real experience of alcohol even while drinking with statements like: “My head feels heavy now, how about yours?”

Working with the Community

Young people could play a vital role in the prevention of alcohol and drug problems by mobilizing their communities. They could create a network among community based organizations and volunteer organizations in their communities through dissemination of the information on the harm caused by alcohol, and convince the community members to support prevention efforts.

The youth group could be the vehicle for prevention messages to peers, children, adult males and females, and the users. They could spread awareness by displaying posters and banners in public places and by distribute leaflets, pamphlets and direct mailers among the general public. They could also facilitate the removal of any promotions and advertisements of alcohol displayed in their communities in shops and boutiques or by the roadside. In addition to these, the youth group could intervene to reduce alcohol use at weddings funerals and other occasions in their communities, and motivate the users to reduce and eventually quit alcohol use.

Working with Children

As an energetic, enthusiastic, and dynamic group, youth could greatly help in getting the children involved in alcohol and drug prevention activities within their communities, especially by conducting interesting and enjoyable activities. Here, it would be helpful to improve children's skills and talents through activities such as singing, music, or sports. Child clubs and child camps could be very useful for alcohol and drug prevention as these could be used to inculcate the correct attitudes and values among children as when the correct beliefs on alcohol are instilled early in life, the use of alcohol is less likely to be seen as attractive and glamorous. Children could also be involved in correcting the misconceptions about alcohol and drug use in their communities. For example, in reply to statements such as "those men boozed yesterday and one of them got high" children could be trained to answer, "By 'high' do you mean he was drunk and feeling ill?" One of the tasks of the community youth group could be training children in these areas and ensuring that they develop an accurate understanding on alcohol.

Working with Users

Another activity that the youth group could engage in is discouraging the consumption of alcohol within their households, neighbourhoods, and the community as a whole by revealing the unpleasantness of alcohol use. Users should not be avoided or disregarded but instead, members of the youth group must become friendlier towards them and assist them to reduce their consumption of alcohol. They could discuss prevention concepts with the users and come to a consensus with them that even if they continue to use alcohol, their subsequent misbehaviour will no longer be tolerated. They could also guide the users to question their actual feelings and effects on alcohol use, and help them to find ways to gradually reduce the amount and frequency of alcohol use and eventually quit.

Working with Informal Groups

The involvement of other community organizations is essential to ensure a more effective community approach and better results. In working towards alcohol prevention, the youth group could join hands with other informal groups operating in the locality to work towards the prevention of alcohol. This could be done by networking with leaders and other powerful personalities within the community.

It should be clearly stated at the beginning that the intention of the programme is not to simply stop the use of alcohol, but to explore the possibilities in abandoning alcohol use towards establishing a new lifestyle that would enable the entire community to live more pleasurably. The members of the informal groups could be involved in prevention activities whilst engaging in their day-to-day work. They could be educated on how to question the basis of alcohol use, to throw light on the reality presumed pleasures of drinking, and to demystify the misconceptions associated with alcohol.

Working with Young Women

Young men often use alcohol to project a macho image in order to impress young women. This provides a good opportunity for the prevention of alcohol use especially among young men. Young female volunteers working with the youth group could be encouraged to convince the young men that alcohol use is not attractive but rather, is injurious to the health. Through this, whenever men attempt to show alcohol as pleasurable and attractive, young women could weaken this image in many ways. For example, when a young man begins to drink before a group of young women in order to impress them, the latter could be taught to respond by speaking to each other (within the earshot of the former) as follows:

- “He looks handsome, doesn’t he”
“But he is ruining himself and his good looks by drinking!”

Likewise, two young women could deliberately initiate a dialogue in the presence of young men as follows:

One young woman could open the conversation with the statement: “Alcohol makes young men manlier doesn’t it?” and the other could disapprove the statement by stating: “No, it makes them look silly!” The conversation could continue on this note with both women agreeing with the latter woman’s views.

Young women could also communicate a strong message on alcohol prevention among their peers, stating that consuming alcohol is an act of cowardice, not courage. Using their creativity young female members of the youth group could communicate, and train other young women to communicate, many such messages in ways that are interesting and do not take too much effort and time.

Empowering Youth

Changing misconceptions of these substances presents a challenge for youth, both male and female, to make positive changes within the community using their creativity and inborn talents for preventing the use of alcohol. This is also a good opportunity for them to gain valuable experiences to face challenges and conquer any future difficulties or challenges they may face in life.

Continuity of Youth Groups

Though youth groups are capable of achieving remarkable results at community level, sustaining them is no easy task. In order to maintain the dedication and interest of the group members, it is necessary to continuously conduct competitive and enjoyable activities and projects, which suit their areas of interest and needs, to produce short and long term results. Every member of the group must be given equal opportunities to participate in activities according to their interest and ability. They should be assigned tasks according to their capabilities, each of which must be well planned and clearly explained.

In order to keep members of the group constantly engaged, it is necessary to often organize inter-group and intra-group competitive activities. Youth leaders should have regular discussions with the group members on possible ways of increasing membership, finding replacements for members who leave the group, and grooming the succeeding leadership. Youth groups should also have work plans and contingency plans as well as well maintained records on all activities conducted.

Evaluations and Reviews

Evaluations and reviews should be conducted regularly at predetermined intervals. In addition to the progress of the group's activities and projects, it is also important to assess the changes in knowledge, skills, and attitudes concerning alcohol and drug use among the group members. Their suggestions, views and opinions of them must also be taken into account. The effectiveness of the activities must also be assessed in order to look for areas for improvement and to select which activities would ensure the stability of the prevention programme.

At the completion of the time period allocated for the programme, the progress achieved should be measured according to the indicators shown below.

Some Indicators for Youth Groups

1. Non-permissiveness and intolerance of alcohol use based on the knowledge that the behavior of users within their homes and society is merely a pretense.
2. Awareness that the chemical effects of alcohol are unpleasant.
3. The ability to identify at least three factors that contribute towards the attractiveness of alcohol

4. Active participation in correcting the erroneous socially learned expectations associated with alcohol
5. The ability to declare non use of alcohol/drugs within the coming year based on the proper understanding of these substances.
6. The successful understanding of the difference between stopping and becoming free from the use of drugs and alcohol and I will do my best to help others become free from the use.
7. The ability to correctly understand the unnecessary expenses and social injustice caused by the use of alcohol.
8. The ability to properly understand at least three of the tactics used by alcohol industry to market their products.

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