

UW-Extension Column
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Which story should we tell.....

Recently, we have been hearing a lot about the number of high school students who are misusing prescription drugs and the expulsions that have occurred in area schools. As a result, the Lincoln County Drug Free Communities Coalition hosted a community meeting that brought together 29 individuals representing various segments of the community. This included health care, law enforcement, school representatives, local government agencies (Health Department, Mental Health, Social Services, Solid Waste, UW-Extension), business, community non-profit organizations, parents, faith community, and media. During this meeting, individuals shared what their agency/organizations are currently doing to address the issue of misuse/abuse of prescription drugs and identified the gaps/needs they see in this area. Information from this meeting has been compiled and shared back with those who attended. A future meeting is being planned to continue to address this important issue.

As a society we tend to focus our attention on the youth who are using alcohol, tobacco and other drugs, including the misuse/abuse of prescription drugs. While it's very important to recognize these issues and develop programs/strategies to help young people engaged in these risky behaviors make healthier decisions, it's as important to highlight that the majority of young people are making healthy choices when it comes to not using alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. This is the focus of the Merrill Social Norms Project currently being implemented by the Lincoln County Drug Free Communities Coalition.

For example, 73% of Merrill High School students indicated in the February 2007 Social Norms survey that they had not smoked cigarettes in the last 30 days. Yet in this same survey, when asked if the typical student in the Merrill High School has smoked cigarettes in the past 30 days, students perceived that 84% of students had done so. This means that students are greatly overestimating the percentage of their peers that are engaging in this risky behavior.

To help get the facts out, our marketing campaign included a poster and community billboard with the message "3 out of 4 Merrill High School Students Choose Not to Smoke". The purpose behind this message is to inform students, parents, and other community members about the actual numbers of students engaged in this behavior and to close the gap between the perceived use and actual use. Based on the results of the February 2008 Social Norms survey, this message has had some impact on student's perceptions. When asked students perceived that 76% of students had smoked cigarettes in the past 30 days versus the 2007 survey where it was 84%. This same impact occurred in the parent survey where the perceived usage went from 83% perceiving that the typical student had smoked cigarettes in the past 30 days in 2007 to 76% in the 2008 survey. This change was even greater among high school staff where the perceived usage went from 84% perceiving the typical student had smoked cigarettes in the past 30 days in 2007 to 69% in the 2008 survey.

Why is closing the gap between perceived usage and the actual usage so important? Individual behaviors are influenced by misperceptions of how peers think and act. For youth in particular, peer influences and perceptions have been found to be influential in shaping individual choices for behavior. If youth are overestimating the number of their peers using tobacco, alcohol or other drugs this discourages them from choosing healthy behaviors by refraining from the use of these substances. As we correct the misperceptions of usage among peers, we will see a decrease in negative behaviors and an increase in the prevalence of healthy choices. In other words, as young people learn they are part of the majority when they choose not to use alcohol, tobacco and other drugs it becomes more acceptable for them to make these healthy choices.

Which story should we tell....based on results of social norms research and what I hear from young people, I believe it's important to tell both. Yes, we need to recognize and address the needs of young people who

are making unhealthy choices to use alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. But, we also need to tell the story and celebrate the fact that the majority of young people are not using alcohol, tobacco and other drugs. We need to change the perception of students, parents, and the community to reflect more accurately the actual behaviors of young people and the fact that the majority of young people are making healthy choices. This side of the story is often the one we leave out.

For more information or to join the efforts of the Lincoln County Drug Free Communities Coalition, contact Jay Punzenberger, Coordinator at 536-5233 ext. 7142, Brenda Janke, UW-Extension Family Living Educator or myself at 536-0304.