Teaching Teens to Manage Personality Traits May Reduce Problem Drinking

High school programs that teach teens to better manage their personality traits can help reduce and postpone problem drinking, a new study suggests.

"Two factors determine problem drinking: personality and peer pressure," said study author Dr. Patricia Conrod of King's College London's Institute of Psychiatry. "Teaching young people how to better manage their personality traits or vulnerabilities helps them make the right decisions in given situations, whether it is a matter of overcoming their fears, managing thoughts that make them very emotional, controlling their compulsions, analyzing objectively the intentions of others or improving their self-perception."

In the two-year study, high school staff in London worked with ninth-grade students, who were divided into two groups. One group participated in a personality-based intervention program run by school staff, while the second group received the standard United Kingdom drug and alcohol curriculum. All of the students' drinking patterns were examined.

Students filled out a personality questionnaire to determine their risk of developing future alcohol dependence. Personality traits identified with a greater risk of alcohol dependence included impulsivity, hopelessness, sensation-seeking, or anxiety, Newswise reports.

School staff members trained in the personality-based program delivered group workshops targeting the different personality profiles. The workshops taught the teens to better manage their personality traits. "Our study shows that this mental health approach to alcohol prevention is much more successful in reducing drinking behavior than giving teenagers general information on the dangers of alcohol," Dr. Conrod said in a news release.

After two years, the study found high-risk students in the intervention group had a 29 percent reduced risk of drinking, a 43 percent reduced risk of binge drinking, and a 29 percent reduced risk of problem drinking, compared with high-risk students in the standard drug and alcohol education programs. The intervention also significantly slowed the progression to more risky drinking behavior in the high-risk students over the two years.

The study appears in JAMA Psychiatry.

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