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Marijuana Use Prevention

Understanding Use Motives to Support Abstainers

Background

The body of literature on the best practices for marijuana prevention in college students is scant. However, we do know that supporting those students who are abstainers is key. Understanding the characteristics of abstainers, as well as the motivations behind students' marijuana use can be helpful in crafting targeted prevention strategies. A number of studies have examined substance use motivations, in general (including alcohol and other drugs), but recent studies have found a set of marijuana-specific motives.

Below, we've presented what is known about factors in initiation of marijuana use, research on use motives, and related program components that show at least theoretical promise in preventing initiation through addressing marijuana use motives and the support of abstainers.

This document is part of a series designed to support Minnesota's Partnership For Success grantees working on marijuana use prevention on college campuses. More resources from this series can be found in the Toolbox at SUMN.org

What does the research say about risk and protective factors in relation to abstainers?

- **Perceptions of risk may serve a protective role against initiation.** "...Non-users reported greater perceived risk for consequences within academic and social domains than did marijuana users. ...That abstainers perceive greater risks related to marijuana use than users suggests that perceived risks may be particularly relevant with respect to initiation of use. Thus, highlighting the potential consequences of marijuana use to students who have never tried marijuana may contribute to continued abstinence. Moreover, perceptions of high risk may be more protective for initiation of marijuana use but not escalation or severity."¹ Another study found that once marijuana use was initiated, the (protective) negative expectancies decreased, corroborating the role of risk perception in preventing use.²
- **Students whose friends use marijuana are more likely to use it themselves.** In a study examining the risk of marijuana and other substance use, "the number of friends using a substance and perceived risk remained significant ($p < .05$, two-tailed) predictors of all substance use outcomes."³

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- **Parents are still important, even in college.** One study found that “both low levels of parental monitoring during the last year of high school and a high percentage of marijuana-using peers independently predicted marijuana exposure opportunity during college. ...Among individuals with exposure opportunity, peer marijuana use... but not parental monitoring, was associated with marijuana initiation.”⁴ Further, although going to college was found to be a risk factor itself, higher parental monitoring “moderated the effect of going to college on marijuana use.”⁵

What are the motives for marijuana initiation and use?

The widely-used Marijuana Motives Measure (MMM)⁶ was adapted from the Drinking Motives Questionnaire for alcohol use⁷ by incorporating a category for expansion motives, which accounts for marijuana’s unique psychoactive effects. The MMM divides use motives into five categories:

- enhancement (e.g., because it’s enjoyable)
- conformity (e.g., to fit in with friends)
- expansion (e.g., greater awareness)
- coping (e.g., to deal with anxiety or other negative affect)
- social motives (e.g., to have more fun at a party)

Research by Lee et al. later explored the self-described, marijuana-specific motives of incoming first-year college students who had indicated that they’d tried marijuana at least once in their lives.⁸ The main reasons for use cited by students were (in order of importance):

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| • enjoyment/fun | 52% |
| • conformity | 43% |
| • experimentation | 41% |
| • social enhancement | 26% |
| • boredom | 25% |
| • relaxation | 25% |
| • coping | 18% |
| • availability | 14% |
| • relative low risk | 11% |
| • altered perception or perspectives | 11% |

In the Lee study, fewer than 5% endorsed alcohol use (e.g. alcohol factored into their decision to use marijuana), anxiety reduction, celebration, medical use, or habit. It is possible that, because of the age of the participants, those with certain motives (such as experimentation) were more highly represented in this study than those with other motives (such as habit or dependence).

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What are the components of successful programs that support abstainers and address marijuana use motives?

Once the characteristics of abstainers and the motivations for use are understood, it's easier to craft effective prevention strategies.

Please note that any one of these components may be ineffective when used alone, but may be effective as a component of a broader strategy.

- **Normative education.** Students whose friends use marijuana are more likely to initiate use; those who believe that most students use marijuana may also be more likely to use it themselves. Norming campaigns have been effective in correcting misperceptions, although their effectiveness in reducing use is unproven. Theoretically, students whose use is driven by conformity motives may be affected by such campaigns.
- **Education about effects and consequences.** Because students who perceive greater risks of marijuana use are less likely to initiate use, campaigns to educate students on the effects of marijuana may be helpful. These can include the negative effects on cognitive abilities (and, possibly, on grades), as well as effects on sleep, eating, motivation, and mental health. Education may be especially effective for students who are thinking about experimenting, or those who believe marijuana use carries low relative risks. Those with coping motives may be deterred when they find that marijuana can worsen anxiety, depression, or sleeping problems over the long term. See *Guidance Top Sheet 4: Adverse Health Effects of Marijuana Use* for more information. School-based and legal consequences can also be discussed.
- **Promotion of sober activities and spaces.** Sober campus activities provide outlets for student entertainment that don't rely on substance use. Additionally, they provide opportunities for students to develop relationships with other non-using students. Examples include [St. Cloud, MN's Blizzardshack event](#); sober dance parties; weekend evening intramural sports; sober music/campus entertainment, with music or comedy shows; and substance-free student housing. Sober activities can be especially useful in reaching out to students who report enhancement and social motives, and can alleviate boredom that can lead to experimentation and substance use.
- **Refusal and coping skills training programs.** Although coping with depression or anxiety was only endorsed by a small number of people in the Lee study, relaxation was named by nearly a quarter of respondents.

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Programs like [InShape Prevention Plus Wellness](#) use positive self-images and future goals to manage stress and encourage abstinence of substance use. Other programs, like [Acceptance-Based Behavioral Therapy for Generalized Anxiety Disorder](#) have not been tested in conjunction with marijuana use, but may provide students with alternative methods for coping with anxiety or other negative affect.

- **Cognitive behavioral interventions.** Cognitive behavioral interventions (CBIs) focus on changing students' thinking and behaviors around substance use. Programs may shift attitudes and beliefs, adjusting motivations and expectancies, as well as providing training to develop refusal and peer intervention skills and stress management. Programs such as [Motivational Enhancement Therapy and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy for Adolescent Cannabis Users](#) could be modified for the college population.
- **Parental involvement.** Some colleges send information about campus substance use programs to parents of incoming students, which can be a catalyst for discussions between students and their parents. In addition, parental notification can be included in an institution's set of drug use policies as a deterrent to student use. Conditions set for parental notification can vary, from violation of campus rules (such as medical marijuana use on campus) to violation of local laws (such as any recreational marijuana use). Parental notification policies should be developed in coordination with privacy laws.⁹
- **Limiting access.** Because recreational marijuana is already illegal in Minnesota, and medical cannabis is banned on campuses, legal access is limited. However, community-level environmental prevention may still be effective for marijuana. For example, tobacco use has been linked to marijuana use. (See the *High Risk Population Tip Sheet: Tobacco Users* for more information). Therefore, colleges may wish to review their policies, and consider limiting the availability of related paraphernalia, such as smoking pipes, vaporizers, and e-cigarettes on campuses.

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Citations

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