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An Examination of Rates of Use and Correlates of Protective Behavioral Strategies among College Students

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INTRODUCTION

Alcohol use is prevalent among college students (NIAAA, 2016). Harm reduction prevention strategies are one approach frequently used on college campuses, with the promotion of the use of protective behavioral strategies as particularly common. Protective behavioral strategies (PBS) are behaviors utilized to reduce alcohol consumption and/or prevent or minimize alcohol-related consequences. Protective behavioral strategies are physical-based (i.e., eat before and/or during drinking) and social-oriented (i.e., stay with a group of friends). Scales assessing PBS typically have a variety of both of these types of strategies (i.e., ACHA-NCHA II). Although research has shown the use of PBS among college students is associated with better outcomes (Pearson, 2013), very little information exists on patterns of use among college students, such as differential use of different strategies by gender and year of enrollment. This information, along with information on correlates related to PBS, such as access to information and alcohol use, would inform a customized approach to prevention strategies.

OBJECTIVES

- 1) Identify the rates of use of social and physical protective behavioral strategies among males and females.
- 2) Identify the rates of use of social and physical protective behavioral strategies based on year of enrollment.
- 3) Examine correlations between protective behavioral strategies and information on substance use.
- 4) Examine correlations between protective behavioral strategies and alcohol use.

METHODS

Participants

This research study included 364 college students from a mid-size liberal arts university in the northeast region of the United States. The sample included:
78% Female, 89% White
20% Freshmen, 31% Sophomore, 26% Junior, 20% Senior, 1%, 5th Year Undergraduate
100% Enrolled Full-time
57% Residing on Campus

20 Average Age

Procedures

An online survey was sent out to students in the Spring of 2016. A raffle for twenty \$25 Amazon gift cards was offered as an incentive. The appropriate Institutional Review Board process was completed.

METHODS

Measures

Data was obtained from an online ACHA-NCHA II survey which assesses the physical and psychological health of college students. The survey includes a scale on protective behavioral strategies used during the last 12 months and consists of eleven items (see Table 1). Items were categorized as physical or social strategies. Receipt of information and interest in receipt of information related to substance use from student's college/university was assessed with two items. Alcohol use was assessed with one item on the number of times in the past two weeks consumed 5 or more drinks in one sitting and one item on the number of days in the last 30 days used alcohol.

RESULTS

Females reported higher rates of use of the physical strategies of alternating non-alcoholic with alcoholic drinks (26%), setting a limit (31%), and keeping track of how many drinks (56%), and higher rates of use of the social strategies of having a friend let you know you've had enough (38%) and staying with the same group of friends (72%). Males and females had similar rates of use of the physical strategies of avoiding drinking games (females 15%, males 15%), choosing not to drink (females 11%, males 18%), eating before drinking (females 68%, males 69%), and sticking with one kind of alcohol (females 49%, males, 45%) and similar rates of use of the social strategy of use of a designated driver (females, 74%, males 73%).

Table 1. Frequency of Most of the Time/Always Use of Protective Behavioral Strategies Based on Enrollment

	Freshman	Sophomore	Junior	Senior
Physical PBS				
Alternate non alcoholic with alcoholic beverages	22%	20%	22%	27%
Avoid drinking games	15%	11%	18%	18%
Choose not to drink alcohol	14%	14%	60%	55%
Determine in advance not to exceed a set number of drinks	39%	23%	26%	30%
Eat before and/or during drinking	65%	61%	73%	79%
Keep track of how many drinks you were having	50%	49%	47%	71%
Pace your drinks to 1 or fewer per hour	34%	19%	23%	31%
Stick with one kind of alcohol when drinking	50%	41%	46%	61%
Social PBS				
Have a friend let you know when you've had enough	46%	29%	30%	35%
Stay with the same group of friends the entire time you were drinking	64%	62%	75%	83%
Use a designated driver	72%	68%	75%	89%

RESULTS

Table 2. Correlations of Physical and Social Protective Behavioral Strategies with Receipt of and Interest in Information on Substance Use

	1	2	3	4
1. Received Information	1	.114*	.089	.121*
2. Interested in Information	.114*	1	.013	-.006
3. Physical PBS Total	.089	.013	1	.920**
4. Social PBS Total	.121*	-.006	.920**	1

*Correlations significant at 0.05 level.

**Correlations significant at 0.01 level.

Table 3. Correlations of Physical and Social Protective Behavioral Strategies with Alcohol Use and Binge Drinking

	1	2	3	4	5
1. PBS Total	1	.962**	.992**	.510**	.165**
2. Social PBS Total	.962**	1	.920**	.557**	.217**
3. Physical PBS Total	.992**	.920**	1	.475**	.139**
4. Last 30 Days Alcohol	.510**	.557**	.475**	1	.579**
5. Last 2 weeks 5+ drinks	.165**	.217**	.139**	.579**	1

**Correlations significant at 0.01 level.

DISCUSSION

Results indicated that females used social PBS at higher rates than males, however both genders used some physical PBS at about the same rates. Additionally, underclassmen were less likely to use particular physical strategies, such as choosing not to drink, whereas social strategies were generally utilized at about the same rate across years of enrollment. An examination of correlates revealed that social PBS were associated with having received information on substance use. Furthermore, use of both physical and social PBS were associated with higher rates of alcohol use. The different rates of use of PBS across gender and year of enrollment point to the potential for customized/tailored prevention efforts to increase use of these strategies. Future research examining these findings in a larger and more diverse sample would provide further understanding of the differential use of PBS.

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