Women and Prevention: Lessons from an Alcohol Education Program for College Women

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About the Author

Nancy A. Gleason is Senior Social Worker in the Stone Center Counseling Service of Wellesley College. She is also Coordinator of On-Campus Prevention Programming and Director of Project W.A.I.T. (Wellesley Alcohol Informational Theater). In these various capacities, she is a clinician, a supervisor, a trainer, and a program developer. Her work is based on the theoretical perspective of the Stone Center's Education Division, directed by Jean Baker Miller, M.D., and represented by the Stone Center Works in Progress and the book Women's Growth in Connection.

Abstract

The program described here was created in response to the need for alcohol education specific to women. It is based on an application of recent perspectives about the psychology of women to women's use of substances, especially alcohol. By examining the importance of relationships in women's developing self-esteem and the intuitive and contextual processes that characterize women's cognitive abilities, we can see that substance abuse, and other self-defeating behaviors, are maladaptive routes toward coping with unrewarding social situations and relieving pain. These new perspectives also offer ways in which prevention and health promotion programs can be made more effective, and we have applied them in a general way to principles of prevention programming. The Wellesley College program uses a theater model to present the issues. As it has developed, its purposes have broadened to include other subjects and problems, such as eating disorders, acquaintance rape, and safer sex, as well as substance use and abuse. It appears that this prevention model may be used to address a wide variety of issues.

Acknowledgments

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Special thanks are due to the women who have worked to develop this program. It has evolved through the direction of Susan Jordan, Melinda Stewart, and now Schroeder Stribling, who was in the original troupe of actresses and has gone on to become its Educator. To all the students who have participated as actresses, we owe much gratitude.

History of Project W.A.I.T.

Aware of a need to educate students in the risks of alcohol use, members of the staff of the Counseling Service at Wellesley College set about to create an appropriate program in 1984. We sought to tailor a program to fit women's concerns, issues, and learning styles. It was clear that such a program must offer material relevant to women's experience—with particular regard to our belief that relationships are central to women's psychological well-being. We wanted a program that specifically addressed issues for women consuming and/or abusing alcohol and for women in relationships with people abusing alcohol. We also wanted a program that used primary prevention techniques appropriate to women.

We thought about college-age women and the difficulty many have in sharing their problems or

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concerns with each other. The widely held assumption that academic success and personal "togetherness" go hand in hand causes many students to hold back and not tell others when they are unhappy, worried, afraid, ashamed, lonely, or angry. This withdrawal prevents them from learning how others handle similar feelings or problems and intensifies their belief that they must suffer alone. The recognition of this aspect of student life, joined with the belief that people learn from their peers, strongly indicated that a group format was essential to the success of the program. We wanted to insure that our prevention program was developed from and with students and reflected their experiences and language. And, finally, we wanted to avoid a moralistic tone, presenting circumstances but allowing individuals to make judgments that were personally appropriate.

The resulting program, familiarly called "Project W.A.I.T." (Wellesley Alcohol Informational Theater), seeks to engage students and help them to develop personal responsibility for their behavior. Originally funded in the fall of 1984 by a Personal Health Management Award from Metropolitan Life Foundation and expanded by a grant in 1987 from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education (FIPSE), the program uses student-created and student-acted skits to portray difficult issues about alcohol use or abuse (and the relationship of substance abuse to such issues as AIDS, incest, and eating disorders) to an audience of college women. In a normal workshop, the troupe performs between six and ten skits which portray situations that members of the audience may have already encountered, or may encounter in the future. Discussion with the audience follows. Two videotapes have been made of the skits for use when a live performance is not possible, and a third videotape describes how the program is developed, and why. All are available for purchase or rental through the Stone Center.

Evaluation of the program was undertaken as part of the FIPSE Institution-Wide Program (Gleason, 1990). Comparing surveys completed by two sophomore classes in 1988 and 1990 (classes of 1990 and 1992), we found that the number of students who had been intoxicated at least forty times was reduced from 12 percent to 9 percent. When asked how many times they had been intoxicated in the previous thirty days, the number saying "none" increased from 44 percent to 54 percent, while those reporting five or more times decreased from 14 percent to 5 percent. Fifty-two percent of the 1990 sample had seen a W.A.I.T. performance, compared to 28 percent in the earlier sample, since the program had developed a strong reputation on campus.

Psychology of women

Recent information has clarified psychological differences between genders (Miller, 1986; Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, and Surrey, 1991; Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, 1986; Gilligan, 1982). Psychologists, sociologists, educators, and researchers are recognizing that traditional theories have undervalued women's attributes and skills and negatively impacted their self-esteem. Traditionally, if women were not clear thinking, rational, capable of simplifying ethical problems into rights and wrongs, competitive, ambitious, career-oriented, and striving, they were described as inadequate in academia and the market place. Qualities such as sensitivity, empathy, cooperativeness, emotionality, and seeing the needs of others as important as one's own, have traditionally been seen as "female" and, therefore, signs of deficiency—suggesting the conclusion that women may be inherently less competent and that these qualities are roadblocks on the path to success (Gilligan, 1982). Women have not had the kind of support and acknowledgment that helps them to feel good about who they are.

At the same time, women are encouraged to be good caretakers, mothers to their children, and nurturers to others. They are supposed to be self-effacing yet attentive to their bodies, their clothes, their makeup, and their behavior in order to be attractive to others, especially to those of the opposite sex. No wonder women are confused about who they are and what is expected of them. They are continuously reminded of their failure to accomplish others' expectations—as these expectations have also become their own.

For college women, nurturing, understanding, caring, and attending to the needs of others, which may be "all right for motherhood," are not valued or seen as a "proper" educational goal. Analytic learning, more masculine in style, is valued over the more intuitive style at which women are adept (Belenky et al., 1986). As college age women search for a sense of identity and direction, these confusing messages are particularly poignant.

If, as Jean Baker Miller and others at Wellesley College's Stone Center suggest, a woman's sense of