

Making alcohol, tobacco and drug use less appealing for teens

May 22 2017, by Ken Branson



Credit: Jourden C/public domain

Picture this: Young people at a beach party, having a great time, looking

healthy, holding bottles of cold beer. What's missing from our beer ad? Vomiting, blurred vision, clouded judgment and hangovers, among other things.

Teenagers are particularly susceptible to attractive images in ads, movies and online material, says. Kathryn Greene, professor of communication in the School of Communication and Information, and they lack the [media](#) literacy to evaluate and counter these messages. She and her colleagues developed a new curriculum to increase teenagers' media savvy and help them imagine what alcohol or tobacco companies are leaving out. Greene's curriculum, called Youth Message Design and now available online as REAL Media, explains how advertising and media-messaging work, and helps students use that knowledge to craft counter-messages about alcohol, tobacco and other drugs.

The National Institute on Drug Abuse, part of the National Institutes of Health, funded Greene's pilot studies and an expanded study. Greene, her SCI colleague Chirag Shah, SCI graduate Smita Banerjee and their partners at REAL Prevention LLC are now working with 4-H organizations in five states to adapt the curriculum for use in their clubs and further test it. An agency of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has given Youth Message Design its highest rating – effective – for improving teenagers' knowledge, attitudes and beliefs. Rutgers Today asked Greene about the state of the fight against addiction, what's been missing from that effort and how her curriculum can help.

What should our goal be in educating young people about drugs, alcohol and tobacco?

Greene: Young people are bombarded with messages that try to convince them to make poor decisions, and many youth haven't developed the critical thinking, communication and relationship skills that would help

them manage these choices in healthy and responsible ways. They need to understand and analyze what's going on, especially the risks and consequences involved as well as the many influences that are guiding their choices.

What's been missing in our efforts to reach that goal?

Greene: We often lecture to [young people](#) – mainly in middle school – about their choices, or we try to scare or threaten them to restrict these choices. What we haven't done, particularly for people in their mid-teens, is provide them with the skills and information they need to shape their own information environments. Also, we haven't connected with young people through the technology that saturates their lives – and which advertisers use so effectively.

How does the curriculum based on your research, which you've designed and tested, fill that gap?

Greene: REAL media is online and self-paced. It can be delivered anywhere, and doesn't require a school setting or a teacher. The e-learning curriculum helps students understand how the media – mainly advertising media – attempt to manipulate them to make unhealthy choices. Then it provides motivation and skills for youth to fight back by creating "counter-messages" that encourage healthy behavior. We teach them the strategies advertisers and others use to influence and then the production techniques needed to make effective messages. A counter-message to a beer commercial might include some representation of nausea or images of long-term health effects of alcohol abuse, such as liver disease, or a car crash resulting from drunken driving.

How do you define "media literacy," and what does it have to do with educating young people about drugs, alcohol and tobacco?

Greene: Media literacy is the ability to analyze media messages critically and to be able to produce one's own messages. Analysis helps youth understand how the advertisers try to influence them and how they produce messages. Surveys taken after students have used our REAL media [curriculum](#) tell us that they're better able to critically analyze the messages they receive critically, and so they are less susceptible to influence. We also find that being able to create counter-messages makes them less likely to do unhealthy things. Sharing these [messages](#) with peers reinforces this effect and spreads it to their social networks.

Provided by Rutgers University

Citation: Making alcohol, tobacco and drug use less appealing for teens (2017, May 22) retrieved 20 December 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2017-05-alcohol-tobacco-drug-appealing-teens.html>

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