

GAPC 2013

Challenging Alcohol Expectancies among Children and Youth

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Abstract: The Foundation for Innovative Social Development (FISD) and Healthy Lanka Alliance for Development (HLAD) have worked in 110 communities since 2009 targeting approximately 5000 children and youth under the Alcohol, Drugs and Development (ADD) programme. Focusing primarily on the cognitive aspect of alcohol prevention, one of the main objectives of the programme is to delay the initiation of and/or prevent the use of alcohol among children and youth.

Seeking to present a sustainable technique of alcohol prevention, the programme took place in the form of an action research conducted in the communities in which FISD and HLAD operate. Its main methodology involves challenging alcohol expectancies as a means of prevention, a concept that is today, much discussed in literature and recognized as a positive method of delaying the initiation of and preventing alcohol use.

The rationale behind the selection of Expectancy challenge as the programme's methodology was the finding, through the baseline survey conducted prior to the initiation of the ADD programme, that in all programme locations, the main motivating factor for youth and children to experiment with and initiate alcohol use was the attractive image of the substance, the fact that many young people saw it as a pleasant, beneficial, glamorous, and magical substance. Four main themes under which the expectancies on alcohol could be challenged were then recognized. These are the pardoning and sanctioning of alcohol induced misbehaviour as well as the resulting privileges for alcohol users, the attribution of pleasure to alcohol through the process of conditioning and social learning, wrongly held beliefs and positive outcome expectancies regarding alcohol, and the removal of withdrawal discomfort. Based on these factors, four categories were designed and presented to the youth as a form of guidance towards self learning based on observation and analysis. As a result of FISD/HLAD's work with 5000 children and youth in 110 communities in Sri Lanka, 70 questions were developed. Most of these questions were self revealing and sometimes sufficient enough to change the positive outcome expectancies on alcohol within individuals. The children and youth who went through this questioning process gradually began to see alcohol as boring, uninteresting, and silly.

It is expected that thorough analysis of the observation based on the self-realizing questions would lead to the questioning of how an unpleasant substance came to be viewed a pleasant. The programme seeks to be a form of cognitive therapy to create cognitive dissonance among these groups thereby motivating them to change the existing schema relating to alcohol and alcohol use. This would eventually result in children unlearning the wrongly learned beliefs on alcohol and moving away from the substance and the use. Though formal evaluation of the programme is pending, preliminary studies show that at present, eighty percent of the children (aged twelve to eighteen) and youth (aged nineteen to twenty six) in all FISD and HLAD programme locations have learned that the use of alcohol is an uninteresting and irrational act.

Introduction

Expectancies surrounding alcohol have long since been recognized as the main underlying reason for individuals to be attracted to, to use, and to continue the use of alcohol as well as for society to allow the use of alcohol and the related behaviour. Based on this premise it may then be said that challenging these very expectancies upon which alcohol use and its prevalence are based has been found to be effective in the process of alcohol prevention. This paper discusses the expectancy challenge approach employed by the Foundation for Innovative Social Development (FISD) and

Healthy Lanka Alliance for Development (HLAD), two organizations operating in Sri Lanka, in working towards the prevention of alcohol and alcohol related harm.

A baseline survey conducted prior to the initiation of FISD/HLAD's programmes revealed that the main motivating factor for youth and children to experiment with and initiate alcohol use was the attractive image of the substance, the fact that many young people saw it as a pleasant, beneficial, glamorous, and magical substance. In depth questioning revealed that many children and youth held similar views on alcohol despite not having used the substance. A comprehensive method based on creating public awareness and challenging the common beliefs and expectancies on alcohol was then formulated and implemented on the field in the form of an action research. The rationale behind the designing of the programmes was that by unlearning the previously learned false expectancies on alcohol, among the members of the community, especially children and youth, it would be possible to greatly reduce the attraction towards as well as the initiation and continuation of the use of alcohol and, consequently, the harm and abusive behaviour associated with alcohol use. The following sections in this paper explain the concept of expectancy challenge and the process of FISD/HLAD's programmes.

Alcohol Expectancies

Alcohol expectancies are generally understood as beliefs concerning alcohol that commonly exist in society. They are the cognitive, affective, and behavioural outcomes that an individual expects to occur following the use of alcohol. Just as expectancies vary from person to person, the nature of these expectancies vary depending on the context in which alcohol is used. Expectancies could influence and reinforce the behaviour of individuals. These expectancies are rooted in the cognition of the alcohol users and are a complex bio-psychosocial construct. The Expectancy Theory explains this in terms of expectancies on alcohol as the interaction between alcohol, the environment, and the individual, stating that individuals tend to consume higher quantities of alcohol when their expectancies of it are positive as influenced by the environment in which they live (Marlatt and Rohsenow, 1980). Many of the effects of alcohol are the result of the learned expectations of individuals than of the pharmacological effects of the substance (Goldman et al, 1990). This suggests that many of the commonly accepted effects of alcohol are based more on psychological factors than on physical factors. Further, individuals could be motivated to use alcohol as a result of the positive expectancies surrounding it in that, the positive expectancies on alcohol play a key role in the extent to which individuals are motivated to use the substance (Marlatt, 1990).

Alcohol expectancies are any form of information reinforcing the value of alcohol that is stored as templates in an individual's memory and can later influence his/her use of alcohol (Goldman et al, 1990). The information thus stored could take several forms including language based information such as words, phrases, and statements regarding alcohol and other forms of information that are not language based. Alcohol expectancies could be considered the most important factor in determining the final pathway to alcohol consumption. Over the years, many researchers have described alcohol expectancies and their connection to drinking behaviour as follows.

- Predicts drinking prospectively for as much as nine years (Newcomb, 1988; Stacy et al, 1991).
- Expectancies rather than chemical effects appear responsible for some behaviour changes when drinking (Martin and Seyette, 1993).
- Expectancies correlate with drinking (Goldman and Dunn, 1996).
- Expectancy changes parallel changes in drinking behaviour (Sher et al, 1996).
- Appear in children before they begin drinking (Goldman and Dunn, 1998).
- Change in a direction that approaches drinking when approaching adolescence (Goldman and Dunn, 2000).
- Expectancy manipulation results in increase or decrease in drinking (Darkes and Goldman, 1993, 1998; Dunn, 2000; Stein, 2000).

Though such expectancies that control and influence alcohol use are common among all alcohol users, unlike many uncontrollable factors, they could be modified and changed. Thus the prevention and treatment of alcohol dependence should be geared towards changing alcohol expectancies.

As discussed above, many of the reasons individuals may give for their use of alcohol centre on psychological factors such as the forgetting of problems, for relaxation, for increasing enjoyment, and as an appetizer, rather than on the real pharmacological effects of alcohol itself. In order to be successful, prevention programmes should then focus on the individuals and their reasons for alcohol use, rather than on the pharmaceutical effects of the alcohol. As none of the reasons for alcohol consumption are based on the pharmacological or chemical effects of ethyl alcohol, therefore it is important to discuss how individuals falsely identify that alcohol use is beneficial, and then gradually work towards deconstructing those falsely held social beliefs and understanding them more realistically.

A key strategy used by FISS and HLAD when working on the field was allowing the communities to question their own experiences and observations on alcohol use. Through this process it was possible to expand the perception of members of the communities, especially children and youth, towards questioning the expectancies on alcohol and relating them to the actual alcohol experience. It was observed that when taken individually, those who questioned the alcohol experience deeply, including the heavy alcohol users, acknowledged that alcohol use is an unpleasant experience. However, when taking the collective views of the community as a whole, there seemed to be an overall tendency to view alcohol use as pleasant and beneficial. The major part of the analysis at the community level then was to question how an experience that is in reality unpleasant came to be viewed as pleasant. The analysis revealed that this occurs in through a procedure made up of the four parts shown below.

1. Pleasure given by others through pardoning and sanctioning alcohol induced misbehaviour
2. Symbol of pleasure through conditioning and social learning
3. Expectations on alcohol use
4. Removal of withdrawal discomfort

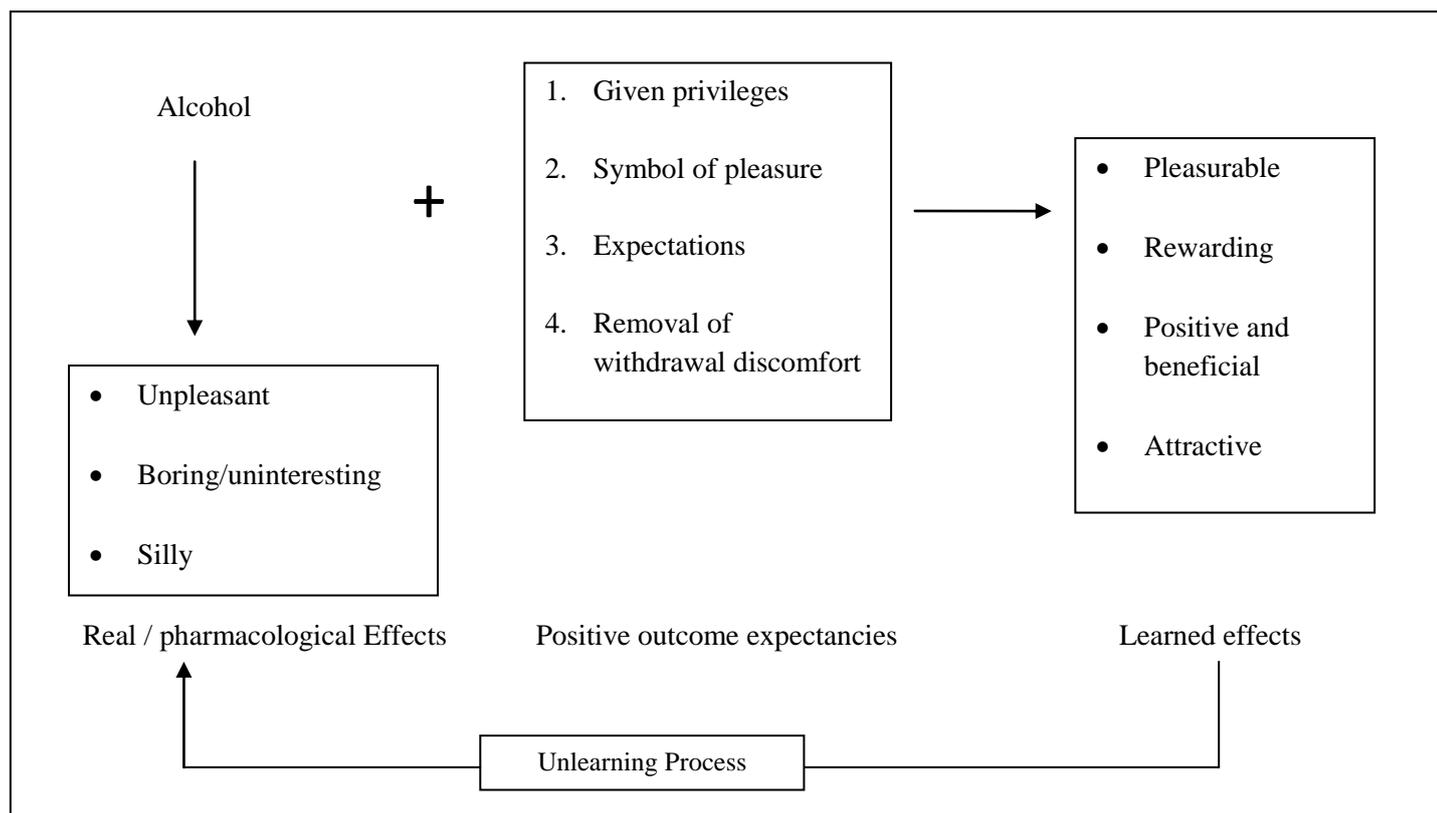


Fig. 1: Positive Outcome Expectancies: Factors that change the perception towards alcohol

1. Alcohol Expectancies and the Pleasure Given by Others

While positive expectancies concerning alcohol play a major role in influencing an individual to commence, react to, and continue its use, at a broader level, alcohol expectancies in society could play a major role in encouraging the use of alcohol and the resulting behaviour. For instance the tendency in many societies to pardon alcohol induced misconduct or to view it with tolerant permissiveness often results in alcohol being used as an alibi by those who engage in unacceptable behaviour. Alcohol users are granted special privileges from family members and from society in general in that they are not held responsible for their actions. However, the blame is placed on alcohol. Alcohol is also used as a self-handicapping strategy allowing users to perform any task poorly under the excuse that they are under the influence of alcohol, thereby saving them the humiliation they would have had to face if sober. This again is a socially held expectancy regarding alcohol, that it inhibits proper physical and mental functioning. Recent research however, suggests that the mental capacity of individuals is in no way hindered following the use of alcohol (Critchlow, 1986; Bodini, 1986; Islieb, Vuchinich, and Tucker, 1988; Higgins and Harris, 1988).

The physical and mental changes generally attributed to alcohol and other drugs are often contradictory. For example, after consuming alcohol some report feeling happy while for others the mood changes to sadness, some become more pleasant and amiable while others become hostile, some are aroused, becoming more passionate or aggressive while others become calm and docile, and some fall silent while others become more talkative. Alcohol, viewed from this perspective, takes on the properties of a magic elixir (Marlatt, 1987). This biphasic response to alcohol and other drugs cannot be explained by the chemical or pharmacological effects of such substances. Other

considerations, such as psychological factors, the individual's learning, and the environment help to shape the behaviour related to alcohol and other drugs.

2. Alcohol as a Symbol of Pleasure

Alcohol is usually consumed on occasions such as parties, festivals, at the end of examinations and on holidays, all of which share certain common features such as;

- A spirit of happiness and cheer
- The friendly gathering of people
- A relaxed atmosphere

The attribution of the increased feelings of joy and goodwill at special occasions to alcohol could be explained through the two learning processes, classical and operant conditioning, and through social learning. This is better explained through the process of classical conditioning, a process of learning by association or the behavioural technique of a pairing a naturally occurring response to a particular stimulus with another stimulus to produce the desired response, which would otherwise not naturally occur to the latter stimulus.

3. Expectations on Alcohol

Expectations on alcohol existing within the community were gathered at the initial meetings with members of each of the communities. Responses to the question below should be elicited from the participants.

- What reasons are given for alcohol use?

Several of the responses most frequently received revealed that alcohol was expected to be:

- A means of forgetting problems
- A symbol of being "macho" or daring
- A means of fun and enjoyment
- A means of easing weariness
- A means of enhancing creativity
- A means of warmth
- An appetizer
- A symbol of sophistication

4. Alcohol as a Means of Relieving Withdrawal Discomfort

It is a known fact that if one becomes accustomed to a particular habit over a period of time, the inability to engage in the habit would certainly cause great discomfort. For example, an individual in the habit of performing a social ritual daily at a particular time would feel very uncomfortable if for any reason, she/he was unable to do so. This feeling is not generated by the ritual itself but rather by the mental conditioning that creates a deeply rooted bond between the individual and the habit. An individual in the habit of gambling or holding bets on a daily basis undergoes several difficulties prevented from gambling or holding bets. An individual who engages in physical exercises daily

would feel uncomfortable if she/he is unable to do so for a day. What an individual experiences when ceasing to use alcohol is then the result of psychologically created discomforts which she/he believes would be relieved when she/he is able to engage in the use of alcohol once again. Here the psychological dependency on alcohol is greater than that of the actual physical effects of its use.

During the course of FISSD/HLAD's programmes it was observed that once the points above were explained to the community many, including alcohol users, were better able to understand their perceptions on alcohol and they were able to reduce, even abandon the use. This was further possible through the use of self-revealing questions that were used to challenge the elements that promote alcohol use and the expectancies surrounding it. These questions were divided into categories according to the four points above and were presented to the communities towards challenging the symbolic meaning of alcohol.

The questions that were raised challenging alcohol related expectancies are listed below.

Pardoning and sanctioning of alcohol induced misbehavior

1. Why would an alcohol user misbehave with those weaker than him under the influence of alcohol behave "normally" with those who are stronger or of authority (E.g. Police Officer)?
2. Why do people behave indecently in their own villages after consuming alcohol behave decently after having consumed alcohol in a sophisticated place (E.g. a five star hotel)?
3. Does the act of others relieving alcohol users from their obligations make alcohol use beneficial?
4. Why should a person who does something wrong under the influence of alcohol be excused while his sober counterpart who does the same deed is punished or reprimanded?
5. How is it that a person is able to find his way home under intoxication, yet claim to be unable to remember what he did at the same time?
6. How is it that a person who cannot remember something he had done wrong under the influence of alcohol is able to remember the exact amount of money that was in his pocket at that time?
7. Why is a person under the influence of alcohol careful to choose to destroy things that are of lesser value and avoid destroying valuable things, especially those he owns?
8. Why does a person under the influence of alcohol choose to break things that would make a more noise when breaking?
9. Why does person supposedly able to talk "openly" while under the influence of alcohol avoid revealing anything that could be held against him later on?
10. Is it not the permissive environment concerning alcohol that encourages users to engage in misbehavior, indecent acts and violence under the influence of alcohol?

11. Is it not the people who pardon and sanction the alcohol induced misbehavior that often become targets of alcohol related violence?
12. Is it not toleration of alcohol induced misbehavior that enables the alcohol users to break social norms of decent behavior?
13. Is it the wrong doer under the influence of alcohol or the alcohol per se should be held responsible for any misbehavior?
14. However much an individual is under the influence of alcohol, if he wishes to stab somebody would he not choose the right person to stab and wouldn't he be able to stab the person in the right place?
15. How is it that however much an individual is intoxicated, he is still able find his way back home safely no matter how difficult the route may be?

Attribution of pleasure of alcohol through the process of condition and social learning

1. How does a user's head, stomach or body feel when using alcohol?
2. Why do some people feel happy and excited at the mere sight of unopened bottles of alcohol?
3. Do people drink on happy occasions or become happy at such occasions because alcohol is consumed?
4. If alcohol is a pleasurable substance, why is it that some people have to be forced to consume it unlike, for example, chocolate?
5. Why is it that there is more laughter, fun, and frolic at a party before alcohol use than afterwards?
6. Isn't it that innuendos (code words and hints) are used to refer to alcohol use to hide the discomforts that it causes?
7. Why do alcohol users need alcohol to feel happy at a particular occasion such as a party or a festival at which a non-user could feel happy without alcohol?
8. Why do alcohol users feel unhappy when alcohol is not available while others feel no difference?
9. Does limiting personal happiness to alcohol use increase or decrease a person's ability to enjoy life?
10. Are the characters of alcohol users portrayed on TV and in films similar to the users in real life?

11. Is alcohol use really pleasurable?
12. Are alcohol users in real life as sexually attractive as alcohol users shown in the media?
13. Isn't it true that people consume alcohol in a particular situation out of the fear of the others in the group?
14. Isn't it true that those who are more dependent on alcohol force others to do drink more out of jealousy?
15. Why does a person usually wait until his/her group of friends meet to consume alcohol instead of consuming it alone?
16. Though people claim to feel happy when at a party drinking with their group of friends, how do they really feel when they leave the group?
17. Why do people consume bites (savory snacks) along with alcohol?
18. When one member of a group suggests using alcohol, why does the mood of the group lift immediately even without alcohol?
19. What are the common characteristics of the various occasions on which alcohol is used?

Expectations on Alcohol Use

1. Does alcohol use make a person "cool"? If so why do most people feel uncomfortable under the influence of alcohol?
2. Does alcohol use make a person "macho"? If so why do some people who use alcohol avoid getting into a dispute with those stronger than themselves?
3. Does alcohol use make a person creative? If so, how many new artistic creations has the person been able to begin and complete under the influence of alcohol?
4. Does alcohol use make a person more rebellious or weak?
5. Does alcohol use make a person sociable or aloof?
6. Does alcohol use make the user smarter than non-users? If so why do some alcohol users get into trouble with others?
7. Does alcohol use make the users more sociable? If so why do many alcohol users always move with the same groups of people limiting their sociability?
8. Do alcohol users use alcohol as an alibi to accuse their wrong doings?
9. Does alcohol use really make a person more sophisticated?

10. Do people use alcohol to handicap themselves in order to cover up their own shortcomings?
11. Do alcohol users really know about alcohol?
12. Would a person who speaks openly under the influence of alcohol say something that could be to his/her disadvantage?
13. Why do people consume alcohol on one occasion to sleep better and consume alcohol on another occasion to be able to keep awake?
14. Is consuming alcohol in the household a violation of the right of the other family members to live happily and peacefully within the home?
15. Why do the reasons to use alcohol vary from one social milieu to another, e.g.: from a happy social milieu to a sad social milieu?
16. How does a person drink alcohol to forget problems on one occasion and on another occasion drinks alcohol and is reminded of old grudges?
17. Though people drink to forget problems, isn't it true that by drinking alcohol, they have only increased them?
18. Although people drink alcohol to ease fatigue, does their fatigue actually decrease or increase because of the alcohol?
19. Will a person who drinks alcohol before sleeping be able to sleep well or will he/she actually feel even more tired the next day after sleep?
20. Why does person who uses alcohol to relax on one occasion, uses it on another occasion to become more active?
21. Is a person really able to relax while experiencing the physical discomforts of using alcohol?
22. If a person is allowed to drink alcohol before an exam, will it enable him/her recall his/her subject notes better?
23. Do women who do more physical work at home usually need alcohol to ease their fatigue as much as men?
24. How is it that a person is now needs alcohol to do certain things that he/she was able to do before without using alcohol?

Removal of withdrawal discomfort of users who are dependent

1. Is it the alcohol or the stopping of work to consume alcohol (the intermission) that makes alcohol more pleasurable and relaxing?
2. Do alcohol dependent persons feeling discomfort return to a normal or reach an even higher state of happiness after consuming alcohol?

3. Does the happiness and satisfaction of being immediately accepted as member of group outweigh the discomforts of alcohol use?
4. Do people really cope with the stresses of the day-to-day life better after using alcohol or is it otherwise?
5. Do alcohol users lead more productive lives than non-users or is it otherwise?
6. Is the level of alcohol consumption inversely proportionate to the wellbeing of the person?
7. Is quitting the use of alcohol the same as being free from alcohol use?
8. Is it not true that those who have limited their happiness and wellbeing cover up their own shortcomings by making others drink more at occasions at which alcohol is used?
9. Is it not true that those dependent on alcohol may see some of their friends reducing or quitting alcohol use as a threat to themselves and to their other drinking companions?
10. Is it not true that the life of a person dependent on alcohol is boring and uninteresting?
11. Is not the expense of alcohol use a loss to the individual, the family, and the community?
12. Is it not true that many non-users connected to the user, for example the user's Family members and friends, make sacrifices to support the lifestyle of the alcohol user?
13. How is it that a person sets out to purchase alcohol because he experiences discomfort from not using it, feels relieved while returning home with the unopened bottle of alcohol?

Conclusion

While the above questions were sufficient to begin a process of thinking in some children and youth which led them to question their own thinking and work towards a change in cognition within themselves, with others discussion based on the questions was necessary to facilitate the desired cognitive change. The process of challenging alcohol expectancies took on several forms. Apart from direct discussion and facilitating young people towards a process of self realization, FISD and HLAD conducted practical activities with child and youth groups in the communities. These activities proved very effective in actively involving children and youth who showed great interest and enthusiasm in participating and contributing towards alcohol prevention. The fact that the young people in the communities are attracted to the idea of challenging conventionally accepted norms and values was helpful in getting their involvement in the programmes.

Another strategy employed by FISD and HLAD was to conduct a six month badge programme towards forming active prevention teams of children and youth in each community. The teams consist of children who successfully completed a six month programme conducted by the two organizations during the past year through a curriculum on which three age appropriate workbooks were designed to suit children aged 6 - 10, 11 – 14, and 15 – 17.

Though formal in depth evaluation is necessary, preliminary findings reveal that among the children and youth who are in the process of change as well as those who show a complete change in expectancies view alcohol as a dull chemical and an unattractive substance. Despite a dropout rate of approximately 20% among all Fisd and HLAD programme locations, it has been found that among the 80% of the children (between the ages of twelve and eighteen) and youth (between the ages of nineteen and twenty six) who participated in the alcohol prevention activities as well as those who participated in the badge programme show a significant change in the perception of alcohol and an eagerness to spread awareness among others in the community. While expectancy challenges has thus been proved an effective, it is expected that this change that has been created among children and youth as well as the process of unlearning the wrongly held beliefs on alcohol would result in an increasing number of children and youth moving away from alcohol use.

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