

A life skills intervention aimed at changing attitudes of Indian youth towards alcohol and drug abuse

J Kaur, D Singh, V P Joshith

Abstract

Background

The misuse of illicit drugs has become a very significant and challenging problem, worldwide. There has been significant increase in crime and violence across the world which may be associated with the illegal production and distribution of illicit drugs. According to a UN report, the number of people dependent on drugs in India is on the increase, indicating very difficult challenges ahead.

Aims

The present study explores the effectiveness of a life skills intervention to change the attitudes of youth towards alcohol and drug abuse, in the Punjab state of India.

Methods

A quasi-experimental design of research was used to conduct the study among a sample of 1000 first

year college students from 6 randomly selected districts of Punjab, India. The scales used for measuring the attitudes of college students towards alcohol and drug abuse were developed for the purpose of this study.

Conclusions

The results of analysis of covariance revealed that life skills training had a significant effect on changing attitudes towards alcohol and drug abuse, among study participants. The findings from this study suggest that the introduction of appropriate life skills programs within institutes of higher education in India, could significantly improve the attitude of youngsters towards the misuse of illicit drugs. This may impact their behavior and reduce future misuse of illicit drugs.

Key words: alcohol abuse, drug abuse, attitudes, college students, life skills training

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Introduction

Young people are the most important human resource of any country but sadly, there has been a tremendous increase in the reported substance abuse among the young population in India (1-2). Youngsters are poised at an intermediate stage between pre-adulthood and adulthood, and they are more prone to experimentation and risk taking, including experimentation with illicit drugs. For some young people, this may appear to be a “cool” and “fashionable” thing to do. The menace of drug trafficking and drug dependency is affecting the whole world (3). The range of substances being abused is very complex and a majority of the substance users belong to the age range of 14-25 years, which is also considered to be one of the most productive age groups (4). The misuse of substances among young people may cause a loss of human potential which is beyond measure (5). According to a UN report, currently there are around

one million people who misuse drugs in India, although the actual numbers may be higher (6). Drug “addiction” is emerging as an epidemic that is increasing at an alarming pace in India. Ever-increasing economic stressors, shaky support systems and loss of cultural values can be reported as some of the chief factors associated with drug abuse (7).

Education about life skills is emerging as a concept that focuses on healthy psychosocial development of youngsters, which has the potential to play a key role in the prevention of drug abuse (8). Furthermore, it is becoming an increasingly popular concept given its focus on positive youth development (9). Life skills programmes empower youngsters to make responsible and healthy choices, thereby paving the way for reduction of substance and drug misuse among the youth (10). One of the major drawbacks of the



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contemporary education system in India is over-emphasis on academic work and grades. However young people also need psychosocial skills to translate their knowledge to behavior, enabling them to make healthy life choices and responsible decisions. Life skills focus on developing the psychosocial competence among youth by empowering them to take control over their actions (11). These include aspects such as the ability to develop social networks, developing relationships, building self-confidence, dealing with peer pressure, problem-solving skills, coping with emotions and stress. According to the World Health Organization, life skills may enable the youth to handle various modern issues in a mature and responsible manner resulting in improved ability to handle peer pressure by accepting themselves in a better way (11). Life skills enhance adaptive and appropriate behaviors that enable individuals to deal effectively with the demands and challenges of everyday life (12). At the core of life skills education are aspects such as “communicating effectively, developing self-confidence, identifying realistic goals, coping with stress, making rational decisions, managing anxiety and dealing with social situations in an assertive manner”. These skills may be considered essential as they will help young people in tackling various problems and issues during the course of their psychosocial development. Therefore, much emphasis has been given to life skills education during recent decades (13).

A number of recent studies indicate that life skills programs bring about positive changes in individuals by empowering them with psychosocial skills that help them cope better in high risk situations (14-15). These programs may also help in improving quality of life by focusing on the individual’s happiness and psychological well-being (16-17). In a similar vein, effectiveness of life skills intervention for prevention of substance abuse has also been reported (18-19). A number of studies have reported on the effectiveness of life skills training in minimizing drug abuse at a global level, but we could not find any such published studies done in the Indian context (18-19). Given the limited evidence from India, we designed a life skills intervention program aimed at preventing alcohol and drug abuse by changing the attitudes of Indian youth towards the misuse of alcohol and drugs.

Methods

The present study was conducted through a quasi-experimental design to investigate the effect of life skills training on attitudes towards alcohol and drug abuse among Indian youth.

Procedure and study participants

The study population was first year college students aged 19-21 years, pursuing general degree courses in different government and private colleges affiliated with

the Punjabi University, Patiala. This is a premier academic institution of Punjab that caters to the educational needs of the Malwa belt of Punjab, and has 274 affiliated colleges spread across nine districts of Punjab. The Malwa belt of Punjab is a rural and educationally backward area where there is a prevalence of alcohol and drug abuse in many households (20). The list of degree colleges affiliated to Punjabi University, Patiala was sought from the Dean (College Development Council), Punjabi University, Patiala (21). Out of the 274 colleges affiliated with the Punjabi University, Patiala, ten colleges were randomly selected. A total sample of 1000 college students was selected using the multistage random sampling technique, for inclusion in the study. The sample size for the study was determined by considering the level of significance to be 0.01 and the margin of error is 5% as per the table 4.3 (22). From each college, a random sample of 100 first year college students were selected for the experimental or control group from among first year class students, giving due representation to gender and stream of study. The experimental and control group from each college comprised of 50 first year students. In each selected college, prior to the intervention, all students in the experimental and control group were matched based on intelligence, using the Standard Progressive Matrices (23).

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Department of Education, Punjabi University and permission was sought from the relevant authorities and the college principals prior to conducting the study. Ethical Principles and the Code of Conduct as laid down by the American Psychological Association was followed to protect the integrity and confidentiality of participants, at every stage of the present study (24).

Outcomes of interest and tools used

We developed the following research tools for the present study:

1. Attitude towards Alcohol Usage Scale: This scale has 30-items and the respondents were asked to indicate his / her response to each statement on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from “strongly disagree to strongly agree”. The scoring for positive statements was “1, 2, 3, 4 and 5” corresponding to “strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree/ neither disagree, agree and strongly agree”, respectively. Reverse scoring was done for the negative items of the scale. The test-retest reliability of the Punjabi version of the Attitude towards Alcohol Abuse Scale was 0.79.

2. Attitudes towards Drug Abuse Scale: This scale contains 32-items to be responded on a 5-point Likert type scale, ranging from “strongly disagree” to “strongly agree”. The scoring for positive statements was “1, 2, 3, 4 and 5”, corresponding to “strongly disagree, disagree, neither agree/ neither disagree, agree and strongly agree”,

respectively. For negative items, reverse scoring was done. The test-retest reliability for the Punjabi version of this scale was found to be 0.78.

Development of a life skills training module

The life skills training module designed by the researchers for the present study, was an activity-based program aimed for college students, keeping in view the objectives of the study, and the number and nature of currently available life skills training modules. The life skills activities were selected from standardized life skills manuals, with three activities being selected corresponding to ten core life skills as per the World Health Organization (WHO) – namely self-awareness, effective communication, interpersonal relationship, decision-making, problem-solving, creative thinking, critical thinking, empathy, coping with emotions and coping with stress (11). The module was evaluated by a group of ten experts from the disciplines of education and psychology, for content validation. These experts assessed the relevance of the selected activities, and content validity of the life skills training module, and modifications were made as per the suggestions of these experts.

Procedure

The study was conducted in three phases:

- a. **Pre-experimental testing (prior to delivery of life skills intervention):** The pre-testing was done regarding student attitudes towards drug and alcohol abuse, using the tools as described above.
- b. **Delivery of the life skills training:** The life skills training program was conducted with first year college students within the college premises. The life skills training program was executed for one hour daily, for 40 days, in each college. For each life skill, sessions were activity-based and participatory. The life skills training sessions were carried out with the college students in their respective classes. The major techniques used to impart this life skills training were

role play, group activities, lectures demonstrations, and group discussions.

- c. **Post-experimental testing (after delivery of life skills intervention):** These assessments were conducted after the completion of the life skills training program. The above described scales were used to ascertain the attitudes of college students towards alcohol and drug abuse.

Pre and post-experimental assessments were conducted with the college students who received the life skills training, as well as with the control group of students, in the same manner. The students in the control group did not receive any intervention. However, they were given general awareness with regard to health, environment and socio-economic aspects of society.

Analysis

Analysis of covariance (ANCOVA) was used to explore effect of the life skills training on attitude of youth towards alcohol and drug abuse, keeping pre-test scores as covariate.

Results

The experimental group consisted of 502 students (mean age 20.1 years, 302 females) and the control group included 498 students (mean age 20.5 years, 238 females). The mean scores for pre and post-test attitudes towards alcohol and drug abuse, among participants in the experimental and control groups are shown in Table 1.

The mean scores for pre and post-test attitudes towards alcohol and drug abuse, among participants in the experimental and control groups are shown in Table 1. A summary of analysis of covariance, indicating the main effect of the life skills intervention on attitudes of participant students towards alcohol and drug abuse is shown in Table 2. The F-values for the main effect of the life skills intervention on mean attitude scores, with regard

Table 1. Mean scores for pre and post-test attitudes towards alcohol and drug abuse among participants in the experimental and control group

Variable	Stage	Experimental Group			Control Group		
		N	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD
Attitude towards Alcohol Use	Pre-test	502	57.83	4.14	498	57.55	3.97
	Post-test	502	54.72	3.97	498	56.84	4.47
Attitude towards Drug Abuse	Pre-test	502	76.58	3.12	498	76.96	3.04
	Post-test	502	73.21	3.29	498	75.88	3.54

Table 2. Summary of analysis of covariance – attitudes towards alcohol abuse among study participants in the experimental and control groups

Variable	Source	SS	df	MS	F-value
Attitude towards Alcohol Use	Pre-test	13929.28	1	13929.28	349.77**
	Treatment	1418.97	1	1418.97	356.24**
	Error	3971.18	997	3.983	
	Total	19026.47	999		
Attitude towards Drug Abuse	Pre-test	8726.39	1	8726.39	292.40**
	Treatment	1326.75	1	1326.75	444.59**
	Error	2975.20	997	2.98	
	Total	13481.69	999		

**p<0.01

to alcohol and drug abuse were 356.24 and 444.59 respectively (p<0.01) (Table 2). This indicates that the intervention delivered to the experimental group had a significant effect in bringing about a desirable shift in attitudes towards alcohol and drug abuse, among the Indian youth in this study.

Post-hoc analysis was done to explore the significance of the mean differences in the adjusted mean scores of attitudes of participants towards alcohol and drug abuse in the experimental and control groups (Table 3). There was a statistically significant difference between the adjusted mean attitude scores towards alcohol and drug abuse, between the experimental and control group at the post-test stage (p<0.01) (Table 3). This indicates a signifi-

cant difference in attitudes towards alcohol and drug abuse, between the experimental and control group of college students in this study, at the post-test stage.

Discussion

Based on the findings of this study, students who received the life skills training showed a significant improvement of attitudes regarding drug and alcohol abuse, compared to the control group of students who did not receive this intervention. This strongly suggests that the life skills training intervention is useful regarding tempering the attitude of youth towards alcohol and drug abuse. These results are in line with several previous studies done in other countries (18-19).

Table 3. Attitudes towards alcohol and drug abuse – comparison of adjusted mean scores of participants in the experimental and control group

Variable	Group	N	Pre-test	Post-test	Adjusted Means	t-value
Attitude towards Alcohol use	Experimental	502	57.83	54.72	54.59	9.15**
	Control	498	57.54	56.84	56.97	
	General Means			57.68	55.77	
Attitude towards Drug Abuse	Experimental	502	76.58	73.21	73.42	10.85**
	Control	498	76.96	75.88	75.70	
	General Means			76.75	74.53	

**p<0.01

The fact that our study was conducted in single state is a limitation, but we made every effort to minimize any bias by using representative sampling techniques. A strength of our study is that we adapted the life skill intervention for use locally in India, prior to implementation, which may have influenced our positive findings.

The need of the hour is to reorient the pedagogy of life skills education. Education should not be limited to cognitive aspects, but should also address affective and other domains. In schools, at present teaching of life skills to students is done in a routine manner, resulting in possible understanding of its content, but without internalizing the true value of these lessons. Thus the approach to teaching of life skills in schools needs to be revised, resources should be made available and innovative teaching methods should be explored. Different types of audio-visual, activity-based and digital resources should be developed by the Department of Education, Government of Punjab, India to give impetus to life skills education, to make it more interesting and interactive for the learners. The internet and mass media may be used as a powerful tool to influence the youth of today and equip them with life skills education and awareness.

Conclusions

The findings of this novel study conducted in India suggests that locally adapted life skills training has the potential to result in significant desired changes in the attitude of college students towards alcohol and drug abuse. Thus, if made part of the college curriculum, it has the potential to help prevent the misuse of alcohol and drugs among college students. Ongoing research should further explore the feasibility and efficacy of such programs at a national level. We suggest that a life skill approach should be incorporated as a compulsory aspect of the curriculum at institutions of higher education, and it may also be integrated into extracurricular study subjects such as scout programmes and health education, to better engage the students.

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Statement of contributions

J K conceptualized the research paper. D S executed the experimental work for the life skills intervention programme in different colleges. V P J carried out the statistical analysis of data and helped in finalizing this manuscript. All authors approved the final manuscript.

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