

A Brief Summary of Social Norms Theory and the Approach to Promoting Health

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Social norms are fundamental in understanding human behavior. Put simply, norms are what the majority of people in a group do or how they behave (behavioral norms), and what the majority believe about how they and others should act (attitudinal norms). Although many people think of themselves as individuals, the strong tendency of people to conform to group patterns and expectations is consistently documented in laboratory experiments, social surveys, and observations of mass behavior. We are, indeed, herd animals, most of the time looking to others for guidance in how to behave. Research has consistently shown peers to be one of the strongest influences on behavior, especially among youth.

Research has also documented a consistent and dramatic pattern of misperceptions about peer norms. When thinking about high risk and harmful behavior such as substance abuse, violence and bullying, and sexual risk-taking, most people tend to erroneously perceive the problem as the norm among peers. Even though harmful behaviors and negative attitudes supporting them may be a serious problem among youth in many instances, such behaviors and attitudes do not represent what is actually most typical among the majority of youth in a community or school. The majority holds healthy attitudes and exhibits responsible behavior most of the time.

What causes this gap between perception and reality? People myopically construct their impressions of peers based on limited information. They do not know each other's habits as well as they think, and are forced to rely on impressions of peers gleaned from behavior that gains the most attention—behavior that is generally negative. Problem behaviors get a disproportionate amount of attention in peer conversation as well as in mass media news and popular entertainment images. This then distorts one's sense of what is normal or typical among peers.

This overestimation of problem behavior and the failure of most youth to accurately see safe, protective, and responsible behavior and attitudes as the norm have harmful consequences—what I call a “reign of error” in adolescent and young adult cultures. Much if not most of the harm done by negative peer influences occurs through one's misperception of the norm. What peers think and do does influence behavior. But what we believe to be the attitudes and behaviors of our peers is even more important. Indeed, the strongest effect of peers often occurs through the significantly distorted impressions youth develop of peer norms. Amidst these widely held misperceptions of problem behavior as “normal” among peers, those who regularly engage in the problem behavior freely do so thinking they are just like most others. Those who are ambivalent about joining in the behavior may occasionally do so mistakenly feeling a false majority pressure. Finally, most of those who oppose the behavior (the real majority) remain silent as bystanders to the problem behavior of some peers.

The social norms approach to preventing problem behavior and promoting and reinforcing positive behavior, put simply, is to dispel the myths about the problem being the norm among peers. It starts with gathering credible data from a population and identifying the actual norms regarding the attitudes and behavior of concern. Then a social norms intervention intensively communicates the truth through media campaigns, interactive programs, and other educational venues. Evidence has shown people responding to these initiatives with more realistic perceptions of peers, problem behavior decreasing, and the norm of positive behavior growing stronger in the population.