Study finds using present verb tense can positively affect substance abuse

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Dolores Albarracín

(Medical Xpress) -- The use of present versus the past tense in recalling an experience with binge drinking can positively influence behaviors, an important development in aiding the development of alcohol abuse messages.

That is the primary finding of a study by University of Pennsylvania Professor Dolores Albarracín, and colleagues Pilar Carrera, Dolores Muñoz, Amparo Caballero, and Itziar Fernàndez. Their findings, the

result of three studies analyzing the use of tense by college-age students while recalling incidents of binge drinking, is reported in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* (Vol. 48, Issue 5).

How an incident of binge drinking is recalled can have a positive impact on influencing future behavior. Dr. Albarracín, the Martin Fishbein Chair of Communication at Penn's Annenberg School for Communication, said that messages to reduce drinking may benefit from these findings. "It may be best to use the present tense when evoking images of non-drinking behaviors being promoted but the past tense for the drinking behaviors to prevent." She added that use of the present tense in scenarios like self-help groups, may be particularly beneficial in preventing abuse.

Dr. Albarracín and her colleagues conducted three studies where participants wrote about their experiences in binge drinking using either the present or past tense. Experiment number one revealed a stronger influence of past behaviors on drinking intentions when the test participants wrote about an episode of excessive drinking using the present tense. Correspondingly, there was a stronger influence of attitudes toward excessive drinking when participants wrote about the episode in the past tense. Experiments two and three found that the present tense recollections had a more concrete interpretation and impact, while past tense recollections were more abstract.

Participants in the study were, on average, 22-years-old and were primarily female (123 out of a total of 153). All were psychology students from the Autónoma University of Madrid, Spain (That is the school where Drs. Carrera, Muñoz, and Caballero are from; Dr. Fernândez is from the Universidad Nacional de Educatión a Distancia, also in Spain.) and were randomly assigned to each study. Participants were asked to write about their personal experiences with binge drinking (defined as five drinks in a row for males, four drinks in a row for

females) using either the past or present tense. The team also evaluated the degree of difficulty participants experienced in writing about experiences in the past or present tense and found that this did not impact their recollections.

“How we recall and communicate a past event influences future decisions,” Dr. Albarracín explains. “Recalling a past instance of binge drinking can lead to intentions to repeat what one habitually does or what seems beneficial depending on what verb tense is used. Reliving the past of drinking excessively in the present tense (I am drinking) makes people use their past behavior as a guide for future intentions: Regardless of whether people drank a lot or abstained in the past, they intend to do the same in the future. Recalling the past in the past tense (I drank), however, leads to more abstract types of thought and thus forming intentions on the basis of how good or bad drinking seems.”

Provided by University of Pennsylvania

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