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Drama can help educate and motivate, research shows

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Drama certainly has the power to entertain, but can it also change behavior? A play about substance abuse was successful at prompting audience members to participate in substance abuse prevention activities, according to Allyn Howlett, Ph.D., from Wake Forest University School of Medicine.

"This study provides evidence that drama can be an effective mechanism to educate and motivate," said Howlett, who was team leader for the research. "The combination of emotion and information had a significant impact on personal activism."

The project involved creating and producing a play to educate the Durham, N.C., community about substance abuse issues and to encourage involvement in substance abuse prevention activities. The research was conducted while Howlett was a faculty member at the Julius L. Chambers Biomedical/Biotechnology Research Institute at North Carolina Central University in Durham.

After seeing the play, "Tunnels," audience members were more likely to talk to their friends and family about substance abuse and to donate money to organizations involved in substance abuse prevention, according to a report published this month by *Substance Abuse Treatment, Prevention and Policy*, an on-line publication of Biomed Central.

"A goal of the study was to determine whether behavioral changes

leading to increased awareness, communication and participation could be facilitated by the drama," said Howlett, a professor of physiology and pharmacology at Wake Forest.

The play consisted of six vignettes about people addicted to alcohol or drugs. A local playwright developed the scenes with input from a focus group comprised of educators, substance abuse researchers and local substance abuse counselors. Substance abuse problems most common in the community – alcohol, marijuana, heroin, other opiates and cocaine or crack – were included in the drama.

One goal of the project was to educate the audience that drug abuse is a disease. The play also educated participants about protective factors, such as parental monitoring and involvement.

The six performances of "Tunnels" were attended by more than 700 people. Of those, more than 250 adult members of the audience residing in the Durham area agreed to complete a 22-question survey both before and after the play that assessed their attitudes and knowledge about substance abuse and their involvement in substance abuse prevention.

Three months later, a telephone survey assessed their attitudes about substance abuse as a disease and whether the audience had participated in substance abuse prevention activities during the time since they had seen the play.

The after-play survey revealed that the drama met its education objectives and also increased intent to participate in substance abuse prevention activities. Of participants who strongly or somewhat disagreed that drug use is a disease prior to the play, nearly half changed their opinion to somewhat agree and strongly agree after viewing it.

After seeing the play, participants were less likely to agree that alcohol

and other drug use is a choice, and more likely to agree that addicted people must go through treatment to stop using.

Of those who had reported before the play that they never or sometimes volunteered time, talked with others in the community or donated money, after viewing the play 43 percent reported intentions to volunteer, 55 percent intended to talk about substance issues, and 40 percent intended to donate money to organizations.

The telephone survey revealed that participants followed up on their intentions and did discuss the play with others and increased their participation in substance abuse prevention activities, especially donating money to organizations.

In the follow-up survey, 81 percent of respondents reported having talked to their family or friends about alcohol or other drug abuse and 43 percent reported having donated money to organizations involved in substance abuse prevention.

Source: Wake Forest University Baptist Medical Center

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