

Students use ice to learn about the dangers of addictions

Yosemite High School psychology assignment conducted over three-day period

By **ByVolney Dunavan**

(Updated Thursday, December 1, 2005, 12:15 PM)

November's full moon occurred on Tuesday, the 15th. That might have been the explanation for a feeling that things weren't quite right with some Eastern Madera County high school students.

But it wasn't all of it.

One hundred and twenty Yosemite High School students had a three-day assignment in psychology classes: to simulate addiction, with the drug of choice being ice cubes. The goal was to allow the students to experience some of the physical, social, cognitive and emotional experiences a person who is actually addicted to a drug might feel. According to the information sheet given the classes, the more strict the student would be in his or her adherence to the guidelines, the more effective the exercise would be for the student, and the better the debriefing discussion could be. The exercise had been adapted from one given originally at Texas A & M University to the Psychology 697 class of Dr. Ludy T. Benjamin, Jr., and was written as a paper by Todd C. Campbell of the Department of Educational Psychology.

Oh, and by the way, they were to call themselves addicts.

So what is addiction? According to a statement on the Web site for SAMHSA's (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration) National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information, "Drug addiction is a complex illness. The path to drug addiction begins with the act of taking drugs. Over time, a person's ability to choose not to take drugs is compromised. This in large part is a result of the effects of prolonged drug use on brain functioning, and thus on behavior. Addiction, therefore, is characterized by compulsive, drug craving, seeking, and use that persists even in the face of negative consequences."

NCADI is a joint effort of SAMHSA and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

The psychology classes at YHS are taught by Deborah Brown, who has taught there for more than 10 years. The five classes involved in the exercise included two International Baccalaureate Psychology I classes that are part of the two year psychology portion of the prestigious program. According to the YHS website, the YHS IB coordinator, Larry Pesetski, says that the comprehensive international program gives students the best academic preparation possible, readying them to go on to the next level of education; additionally, some colleges are now giving automatic acceptance to IB candidates.

The background story for the Badger psychology exercise went something like this: The students used to be able to "get high" on water only, but their addiction has now progressed beyond that. They need specially processed water in the form of ice cubes. When the students are thirsty, that



Yosemite High School psychology students Ashley Stearns, Jesse Sheffield, Emily McCaugh, Michelle Ruddock and Shelli Nash display the yarn bracelets they wore during a three-day exercise about addiction. The bracelets told those in the know that the students were addicted: to ice cubes.
Volney Dunavan

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is the craving for the drug and every time they take a drink of any liquid, there has to be an ice cube in it ... including not only coffee or hot cocoa, but soup, stew and even morning cereal. Ice cubes need to be used in all drinking situations including drinking fountains, cans or bottles, and even late night drinks of water. The difficulty in planning simulated the addict's planning for the next drink or drug. The bigger wrinkle is that ice cubes are not only socially unacceptable but illegal. This meant the addicted students could not let "regular people" see or catch them using ice cubes. And that meant parents, friends, coaches, teachers, co-workers, bosses and little brothers and sisters too. The only people they could be open about their addiction with were other addicts who were participating in the same exercise.

Drug addiction includes an obsession with the drug of choice. To simulate this, the addicts were to keep an hourly log during their waking hours. They needed to question themselves: were they thirsty? where was their next ice cube coming from? what is their plan to satisfy the craving?

To simulate the "tracks" of a junkie who gets a drug "fix" by shooting a drug into a vein with a hypodermic needle, the students were given a piece of yarn to wear as a bracelet. They had to wear the bracelet at all times and make sure that non-addicted people did not see it and ask embarrassing questions. The bracelet reminded the students that they were participating in an exercise and that, like an addicted person, they could not turn off their cravings by using willpower.

The exercise started Monday morning, Nov. 14, and continued through 5 p.m. on Wednesday, Nov. 16. At that time, the addicts could tell non-addicts about the exercise. The students also at that time were to write a reflection paper describing their thoughts, feelings and reactions to the exercise. The paper and journal were due on Thursday and Friday when the classes formed a circle and had a conversation about the process.

In addition to Mrs. Brown, Valarie Edwards Shaffer, YHS student support coordinator, helped with the debriefing. Various teachers and administrative personnel acted as dealers or otherwise participated in the exercise, and also joined in the debriefing. Also in attendance were two mountain area recovering alcoholics/addicts, both with 19 years clean and sober.

Alternate research paper

For anyone not comfortable with the assignment, there was an alternate research paper on addiction which was to be 750-1000 words long, double-spaced, typed in a size 12 font, and containing at least four creditable sources. Only one student chose to do the alternate assignment which was to include both a definition of and the psychopathology of addiction as well as its implications regarding psychology, psychiatry, sociology, criminology, biology, political science and economics.

In the set-up, Mrs. Brown had suggested that three things might change through doing the exercise: eating, sleeping and hygiene patterns. At debriefing, she explained that brain chemicals had changed during the exercise even though nothing out of the ordinary had been brought into the body. Cortisol, the adrenal gland's contribution to the efficiency of the human body, was generated by the stress of the exercise, and excessive stress and Cortisol can cause yet additional stress and sleeplessness. Additionally, the brain chemical serotonin was generated, too much of which can adversely effect mood, emotion, sleep and appetite.

The impact

The exercise impacted student lives. The students had to ask servers to put an ice cube on drinks such as fruit smoothies; forgot to pack lunches because of the attention on the ice cubes; ate less to cut down on thirst (but still thought about ice cubes); and learned that cough syrup, milk, coffee and soup were "nasty" when an added ice cube melted. Creatively, some students froze milk for their cereal or creamer for their coffee. One even strained soup so as not to have to deal with a liquid.

Some were up late, strategizing their ice cube supply for the next day; some dreamed about the experiment. Several questioned whether other student addicts had gone as far as to involve ice

cubes in the teeth brushing process.

Activities were affected. One student was part of a competition in the valley and encountered difficulties keeping the addiction away from fellow van riders going to and from the event. Sports were greatly impacted because frequently there were no long sleeves to hide the yarn bracelet, and students found themselves taping over it. Some athletes hid their "use" in the bushes. Soccer and swimming students also often taped their yarn bracelet.

There were similar difficulties for the students involved in the jazz band and those involved in a public event at the Oakhurst Senior Center.

Using creativity

The students had to become very creative. When no one was looking, one collected some ice from the serving display in the buffet line in the cafeteria. One stored ice cubes in a suitcase used as a footstool while watching TV. Another kept ice in an open insulated container in a back pack. In both storage cases, the unusual container overturned; in the back pack with the plastic lining, the spilled moisture gathered like a small lake. The few smokers in the classes reported that their puffing had increased during the exercise.

Students who had never had a problem obeying the rules, wrote notes to an administration "dealer" saying "I need to be called out of class to get ice." Others came to "dealers" but hemmed and hawed, not knowing how to ask for the ice cubes. One dealer was charging \$1 an ice cube; another was giving the cubes away "to get the kids hooked." Guidance Counselor/dealer Valinda Clevenger said "I felt powerful," recognizing how important she had become in the life of those students who were really into the exercise. "I would go through the halls shaking my ice."

Bracelets

The yarn bracelets created some interesting speculation among parents, other students and co-workers. In many of Oakhurst's fast food restaurants, students were forced to tape over the bracelet as only short sleeves can be worn during work hours. In just two days, a code developed among the addicts. They would rub their wrist twice or shake hands to see if the bracelet was on the other person's wrist.

Priorities and behaviors changed. Ownership of the ice was denied to family, teachers and friends. Tempers sometimes flared with friends and several younger siblings became jealous because they could tell something was going on and they had been excluded. The addicts were often running to the bathroom as the only safe place to have their ice cubes. This created tensions at some homes, and wild speculation at school when four girls got together in the only big restroom stall, the handicapped one, eating their ice cubes and loudly declaring "Mmm, this tastes sooo good!"

Most debriefing students were clear that they had pushed away from friends and family and that they were pre-occupied with figuring out where to get the ice cubes and who they could drink it with. Many chose to eat dinner in their bedroom; others excused themselves from the dinner table, making numerous trips to the bathroom to eat their ice cubes. By Wednesday, the secret wasn't quite so secret as many confronted teens were forced to come up with an explanation for nervous parents and friends. They openly admitted to lying, cheating and pushing loved ones away. They thought about ice cubes when they should have been listening to classroom instruction, and they became conditioned to think about ice cubes every time they passed the door to classroom 1516. According to Mrs. Brown, that conditioning may last for quite a while.

Response from parents

And how did the parents respond to this simulation? About one third of the students reported that no one noticed that something was going on. Others said they could tell it had been noticed but nothing was said. About half reported that direct questions were asked. Some told the truth; some fabricated stories; and some said it was a school project and there would be information at 5 p.m. on Wednesday. Mrs. Brown urged the experimental teen addicts to be sensitive to their

parents who may have feelings of guilt or even anger at not sensing that something was going on.

"This is an opportunity for a conversation," she said. It also was an opportunity for teens to write a thank you letter to those parents who noticed and said something. One of the recovering alcoholic/addicts also suggested an amends letter, apologizing to themselves and to their parents for lying during the exercise. In 12-step practice, amends is not only being sorry but promising not to do the same thing again.

As a final closure for the exercise, Mrs. Brown raffled two copies of James Frey's "A Million Little Pieces" in each class. The book is an Oprah's (Winfrey) Book Club selection and joins "Symptoms of Withdrawal: A Memoir of Snapshots and Redemption" by Christopher Kennedy Lawford as two 2005 books about the horror and devastation of addiction be it to alcohol or other substances. Mrs. Brown did warn the students that Frey's book is a very hard core presentation of addiction and rehabilitation, and that "Gee Whiz" and "Oh, Fudge" were not the epithets one would find in the book. "If your parents would be concerned with you reading something with more graphic language, do not take a raffle ticket," she said.

Was it a valuable exercise? U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs, Bureau of Justice Statistics reports a Monitoring the Future Study that asked high school seniors, "On how many occasions, if any, have you used drugs or alcohol during the last 12 months or month?"

Study

The 2004 study indicated that 70.6 percent of the 50,000 high school seniors questioned reported alcohol use in the past 12 months and 48.0 percent in the last 30 days. The same students reported 34.3 percent marijuana use in the past 12 months and 19.9 percent in the past 30 days.

When the 120 participating YHS students were asked to rate the exercise from 1 (awful, don't do it again) through 3 (doesn't matter either way) to 5 (super: absolutely do it again) the responses were two with a 1, 3 with a 3 and 115 at either 4 or 5.

Internet information on addiction is available at NCADD.org, SAMHSA's National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information, webmd.com, or other responsible sites. While there are no inpatient programs available in either Madera or Mariposa County, outpatient services and referrals are available through Oakhurst Counseling Center (559) 683-4809, Mariposa Behavioral Health (209) 966-2000, and other private practices. Recorded meeting information for Alcoholics Anonymous in Eastern Madera County is at (559) 683-1662 and in Mariposa is at (209) 966-3110.



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