

Research Society on Alcoholism/ISBRA Meeting, New Orleans, June 20-24, 2020

THE EFFECTS OF A SPIRITUALLY-BASED CHARACTER STRENGTHS TRAINING CURRICULUM ON ALCOHOL USE AMONG ZAMBIAN YOUTH: A RANDOMIZED CONTROLLED TRIAL

J. Paul Seale MD^{1,2}, Kristin Hadfield PhD³, Dana Seale MAPP⁴, Yvonne Pande MA⁵, Troy M. Lewis ThM⁵, Sion K. Harris PhD⁶⁻⁸

¹ Department of Family Medicine, Mercer University School of Medicine, Macon, GA

² Department of Family Medicine, Navicent Health, Macon, GA

³ Department of Biological and Experimental Psychology, Queen Mary University of London, London, England

⁴ Global Resilience Oral Workshops (GROW), Macon, GA

⁵ Expanded Church Response, Inc., Lusaka, Zambia

⁶ Center for Adolescent Substance Use and Addiction Research, Boston Children's Hospital, Boston, MA

⁷ Division of Adolescent and Young Adult Medicine, Boston Children's Hospital, Boston, MA

⁸ Department of Pediatrics, Harvard Medical School, Boston, MA

Purpose:

Character-based resilience training has the potential to yield great dividends for youth. Global Resilience Oral Workshops (GROW) is a 24-week curriculum rooted in positive psychology and spirituality which teaches character strengths and aims to bolster psychological resilience. GROW builds on more than 240 studies which have found an inverse relationship between religion/spirituality and alcohol use. Here, we report preliminary findings from a cluster-randomized trial of GROW on youth alcohol use in Zambia.

Methods:

Twenty-eight classes of youth ages 10-13 were recruited from 21 schools throughout Lusaka to a wait-listed randomized controlled trial. Classes were randomly assigned to either an initial-start (Phase 1, $n=15$) or delayed-start (Phase 2, $n=13$) arm. GROW is taught over 24 weeks by trained teachers addressing one character strength per weekly session that includes stories, drama, music/dance, problem-solving, teamwork activities, and spiritual practices such as meditation, gratitude, and forgiveness. Alcohol outcomes were assessed using confidential self-administered questionnaires – including the Global School-based Student Health Survey substance use questions – administered at baseline (T1), post-Phase 1 (T2), and post-Phase 2 (T3). The study is ongoing. We present findings from T1 and T2. We conducted bivariate analysis to assess baseline group equivalence and examined intervention outcomes using generalized linear modeling, adjusting for school effects and baseline differences between groups.

Data: At baseline, the sample ($N=643$ students; 344 initial-start; 299 delayed-start) had mean \pm SD age of 11.4 \pm 0.9 years; 55.4% female. The delayed-start group had older mean age (11.5 \pm 1.03 vs. 11.3 \pm 0.9, $p=.035$) and higher proportion reporting <3 meals/day (15.7% vs. 9.6%, $p=.020$). These variables were entered as control variables in outcomes analyses. Phase 1 program attendance was high (median classes attended=23, IQR 20-24).

Results:

At baseline, 27.8% of participants reported lifetime alcohol use and 13.2% reported past-30-day use. At T2, we found significantly lower rates of past-30-day alcohol use in the initial-start group compared to the delayed-start group (10.0% vs. 18.5%, relative risk ratio=0.50, 95%CI 0.31-0.80). There were no significant differences in numbers of drinks per day, lifetime drinking days, or lifetime heavy drinking days.

Conclusions:

Character training programs with a strong spirituality focus such as GROW Zambia show promise as a potential alcohol prevention strategy for youth in sub-Saharan Africa.