Positive Choices
Drug and Alcohol Information
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Preventing youth mental ill-health through a new school-based program

The successful alcohol and drug prevention program, OurFutures, now includes a mental health module

Promoting mental health and preventing alcohol or drug use are priorities for enhancing wellbeing among youth. New approaches to school-based wellbeing have been developed recently to target mental health and alcohol/drug use within the one program. This is beneficial as alcohol/drug use, depression, and anxiety often go hand in hand, and share common risk factors (like stress or adverse childhood experiences).

What is OurFutures?

OurFutures, previously called Climate Schools, is a school-based prevention initiative developed by researchers in collaboration with students, teachers, and parents across Australia. OurFutures provides a high quality, evidence-based approach to the prevention of alcohol and other drug use and harms.

Check out this video to find out more about OurFutures.

Initially, OurFutures consisted of four substance use modules – *Alcohol*, *Alcohol & Cannabis*, *Psychostimulants & Cannabis*, and *Ecstasy & Emerging Drugs*. The *Mental Health* module has now been added to the collection of programs that schools can access and implement.

These modules are aimed at students in Years 8-10 (approximately ages 13-16), with some modules that can be implemented in Year 11 as a wellbeing initiative. Each module has 4-6 lessons which include an engaging online cartoon scenario followed by optional teacher led classroom activities. The substance use and mental health modules have been rigorously tested in seven trials involving >14,600 students across 169 Australian schools. Compared to health education as normal, the OurFutures programs were found to improve student outcomes including:

- Reducing alcohol consumption.
- Reducing binge drinking.
- Reducing cannabis use.
- Reducing ecstasy use.
- Reducing pro-drug attitudes and intentions to use substances.
- Increasing knowledge about alcohol, cannabis, ecstasy, and new psychoactive substances.
- Increasing resistance to peer-pressure.
- Reducing alcohol and drug-related harms.

The OurFutures Mental Health module

Adolescence is a stage of life where youth go through significant social, physical, and psychological changes. For some adolescents, symptoms of mental illness such as anxiety and depression also develop during this period. Research shows that roughly half of all lifetime mental health disorders begin in adolescence and three quarters by mid-late 20s. In addition to this, substance use and symptoms of mental illness (e.g., depression, anxiety) often occur together. To address this a *Mental Health* module was developed to complement the OurFutures substance use modules. See below for a snippet of the *Mental Health* module cartoon.

Recently the *Mental Health* module was evaluated within the Climate Schools Combined (CSC) trial. This trial was conducted with 6,386 secondary school students from 71 schools across NSW, QLD, and WA. When compared to students who received usual health education, students who received OurFutures' combined *Mental Health* module and Alcohol & Cannabis module had positive student outcomes including:

- Slowed progression of anxiety symptoms.
- Reduced risk of alcohol use and heavy drinking.
- Increased knowledge about mental health.
- Increased knowledge about alcohol and cannabis.

The results highlighted the benefits of combining the *Alcohol & Cannabis* module with the *Mental Health* module, compared to delivering only mental health education or usual school-based health education. To assess the long-term effects of combining mental health and alcohol and drug prevention, the project will continue to monitor students' drug and mental health knowledge, substance use, and mental health symptoms into their early 20s, which is a time when mental health and substance use disorder reach their peak.

You can read more about the *Mental Health* module and CSC findings in this research paper: *Combined prevention for substance use, depression, and anxiety in adolescence: a cluster-randomised controlled trial of a digital online intervention*.

If you or your school are interested in implementing the OurFutures programs check out their website.

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