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Training boosts bystander confidence in preventing interpersonal violence on college campuses, study finds

Sexual assault, stalking, dating violence and intimate partner violence (collectively termed *interpersonal violence*) are public health problems that affect 20 to 25 percent of female college students.

Currently, One Act is one of the few university prevention-training programs that teach students how to intervene as bystanders in low- and high-risk interpersonal violence situations. Recent research found that the One Act program results in improvements in participant attitudes and behaviors related to date rape, as well as increased bystander confidence and willingness to help.

Kei Alegría-Flores, a doctoral student of health policy and management at the UNC-Chapel Hill Gillings School of Global Public Health, co-authored a paper that evaluates the One Act program. In addition to assessing One Act, the study compared it to an older program called Helping Advocates for Violence Ending Now (HAVEN).

The paper on this research, titled “Preventing Interpersonal Violence on College Campuses: The Effect of One Act Training on Bystander Intervention,” was published online May 22 by the *Journal of Interpersonal Violence* (<http://jiv.sagepub.com/content/early/2015/05/21/0886260515587666.abstract>).

The research team, including co-authors Robert K. Pleasants, PhD, adjunct assistant professor of health behavior, Mark A. Weaver, PhD, research assistant professor of biostatistics, and Morris Weinberger, PhD, Vergil N. Slee Distinguished Professor of health policy and management, all with the Gillings School, and Kelli Raker, MA, coordinator for Violence Prevention Programs at UNC-Chapel Hill Student Wellness, collected data over a two-year period, before and after study participants attended One Act and/or HAVEN trainings.

The One Act trainings focus on a community-based approach to reducing interpersonal violence: addressing the bystander effect. This effect occurs when individuals witness a high-risk or emergency situation but fail to help victims or potential victims because the presence of other bystanders diffuses responsibility.

Bystander education programs on college campuses attempt to teach community members (potential bystanders) safe and effective strategies for intervening in a positive way before, during and/or after potential interpersonal violence.

HAVEN, meanwhile, was developed to teach community members how to appropriately respond to people who disclosed having experienced interpersonal violence. It was not designed to prevent interpersonal violence from occurring.

Alegría-Flores and co-authors found a larger positive impact on bystander confidence among students who participated in the bystander *prevention* training (One Act) compared with the *response* training (HAVEN).

An added benefit of the bystander intervention approach is that it offers participants practical strategies to address and change social norms that create gender inequality and violence, such as assuming every female is a potential victim or every male is a potential aggressor.

At a time when the public is becoming increasingly more aware of interpersonal violence-related incidents and their negative effect on public health, these research findings support a push to strengthen prevention-training programs.

“Based on these results, the next step for One Act at UNC-Chapel Hill is to expand messaging and policies which supports pro-social bystander intervention,” said Alegría-Flores and Raker. “The results of this study also press for the continued rigorous evaluation of programs like One Act in order to improve them and to understand their effect on interpersonal violence.”



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