



Use of alcohol protective behavioral strategies among college students: A critical review



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Reviews studies on protective behavioral strategies (PBS) among college students
- Measurement of alcohol PBS is inconsistent across studies.
- Alcohol PBS is consistently negatively correlated with alcohol-related problems.
- It is less clear what the antecedents to PBS are and moderators of its effects.
- Gaps in the literature are identified to provide suggestions for future research.

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ABSTRACT

Protective behavioral strategies (PBS) are specific behaviors one can utilize to minimize the harmful consequences of alcohol consumption. Recently, there has been an increasing amount of interest in use of PBS among college students, especially as an intervention target. The purpose of the present comprehensive review of the PBS literature was to examine the measurement of PBS and summarize the quantitative relationships between PBS use and other variables. The review found inconsistency across studies in terms of how the use of PBS is operationalized and found only two PBS measures with good psychometric properties that have been replicated. Although several antecedents to PBS use were identified, most were only examined in single studies. Moderators of the predictive effects of PBS use on outcomes have similarly suffered from lack of replication in the literature. Of all 62 published reports reviewed, 80% reported only cross-sectional data, which is unfortunate given that PBS use may change over time and in different contexts. In addition, only two attempted to minimize potential recall biases associated with retrospective assessment of PBS use, and only two used an approach that allowed the examination of both within-subject and between-subject effects. In terms of the gaps in the literature, there is a dearth of longitudinal studies of PBS use, especially intensive longitudinal studies, which are integral to identifying more specifically how, when, and for whom use of PBS can be protective.

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1. Introduction

Among college students, alcohol use contributes to a wide range of negative consequences ranging in severity from social/interpersonal problems to injury and death (Hingson, Zha, & Weitzman, 2009). Behavioral strategies that can be used to minimize the harm associated with alcohol use have received an increasing amount of attention in the past few decades. Although the measurement of these strategies initially emerged based on self-control theory and self-help manuals (Merbaum & Rosenbaum, 1980; Miller & Muñoz, 1982; Vogler & Bartz, 1982; Werch, 1986), the emergence and acceptance of the harm reduction approach to treatment of alcohol misuse (Dimeff, Baer, Kivlahan, & Marlatt, 1999; Marlatt & Witkiewitz, 2002, 2010) has led to increased interest in these behavioral strategies. As PBS use has been shown to mediate intervention effects (Barnett, Murphy, Colby, & Monti, 2007; Larimer et al., 2007; Murphy et al., 2012), increasing the use of these behavioral strategies among college students seems to be a progressively more common intervention target. Given this trend, it is important to conduct a comprehensive review of the literature to determine gaps in our knowledge regarding the use of these strategies.

2. Protective behavioral strategies

Broadly defined, protective behavioral strategies (PBS) are behaviors that reduce the negative consequences experienced from drinking (Martens, Pederson, LaBrie, Ferrier, & Cimini, 2007). They have also been referred to as behavioral self-control strategies (Werch & Gorman, 1986, 1988), drinking control strategies (Sugarman & Carey, 2007) and alcohol reduction strategies (Bonar et al., 2011). Although there is significant variability in how PBS are operationalized, most PBS measures include strategies related to limiting alcohol intake by setting drinking limits (e.g., “Determine not to exceed a set number of drinks”; Martens et al., 2005), consuming non-alcoholic drinks in addition to alcoholic drinks (“Alternating alcoholic and non-alcoholic

beverages when you are drinking”; Sugarman & Carey, 2007), and choosing not to engage in behaviors that lead to drinking quickly (“Avoid drinking games”; Delva et al., 2004; Martens et al., 2005; Novik & Boekeloo, 2011). Some PBS are unrelated to actual alcohol intake and more directly related to ensuring one’s safety like planning safe transportation (“Use a designated driver”; Martens et al., 2005) and preventing the ingestion of unknown substances (“Never left a drink unattended”; Novik & Boekeloo, 2011). Some PBS are related to reducing the potentially negative impact of peers on one’s drinking (“Drink an alcohol look-alike”; Novik & Boekeloo, 2011), and other PBS are related to enhancing the protective impact of peers on one’s drinking (“Have a friend let you know when you’ve had enough”; Delva et al., 2004; Martens et al., 2005; Novik & Boekeloo, 2011). Although not included in all PBS measures, some measures include items related to avoiding alcohol use altogether (“Avoid situations where there was alcohol”; Novik & Boekeloo, 2011; “Choose to participate in enjoyable activities that do not include alcohol consumption”; Sugarman & Carey, 2007).

Despite the variability in the operationalization of PBS, there is mounting evidence that there is an inverse relationship between distinct types of PBS use and alcohol-related outcomes (i.e., alcohol use and alcohol-related problems). In fact, nearly every study in the present review supports the notion that individuals who report using more PBS also report drinking less and/or experiencing fewer alcohol-related problems. Specifically, PBS use has been shown to be negatively correlated with typical and heaviest drinking frequency in the past 30 days (Pearson, Kite & Henson, 2012a, 2012b), typical and heaviest quantity of drinking (Martens et al., 2005; Pearson et al., 2012a, 2012b), number of heavy episodic drinking episodes (Martens, Ferrier and Cimini, 2007; Martens, Pederson, LaBrie, Ferrier and Cimini, 2007; Martens et al., 2007), and estimated blood alcohol concentration from one’s heaviest recent drinking episode (Sugarman & Carey, 2007). Further, PBS use has been shown to be inversely related to various individual alcohol-related problems (Araas & Adams, 2008) as well as various composite

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