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Peer Affect and Substance Use Moderate Affect-Related Substance Use in Teens

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Background

Although some studies report inconsistent support for the relation between affect and substance use in adolescents (Hussong & Hicks, 2003; Windle & Barnes, 1988), the model of self-medication posits that the use of substances may be employed in an effort to reduce the unpleasant feelings experienced as a result of psychological distress (Simons et al., 1991).

Another perspective suggests that the negative affect-substance use relation may be strongest for adolescents with certain individual and contextual vulnerabilities, such as having substance-involved peers. Thus, the current study examined the hypothesis that adolescents learn about alcohol and substance use from their peers, as well as particular styles or reasons for use, such as self-medication.

As an initial test of this hypothesis, our preliminary analysis tested whether adolescents' depression symptoms predict greater substance use among youth whose friends are both substance users and who are showing depression themselves.

Methods

We used a multi-reporter, cross-sectional design to examine this mechanism among youth preparing for the transition to high school, a time generally considered stressful for adolescents.

Eighth grade students across seven middle schools in Chatham County, North Carolina, participated in a one-time survey (n=323; 51% Male; mean age of 13.6 years; 75% Caucasian; 16% African American; 2% Hispanic; 7% Other).

Adolescents completed school-based surveys and self-reported their symptoms of depression and their frequency of alcohol use in the previous six months. Adolescents identified up to five close friends using a peer nomination procedure. Friend-reports of depression and alcohol use were formed by averaging across the self-reports of close friends who also participated in the survey.

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Results

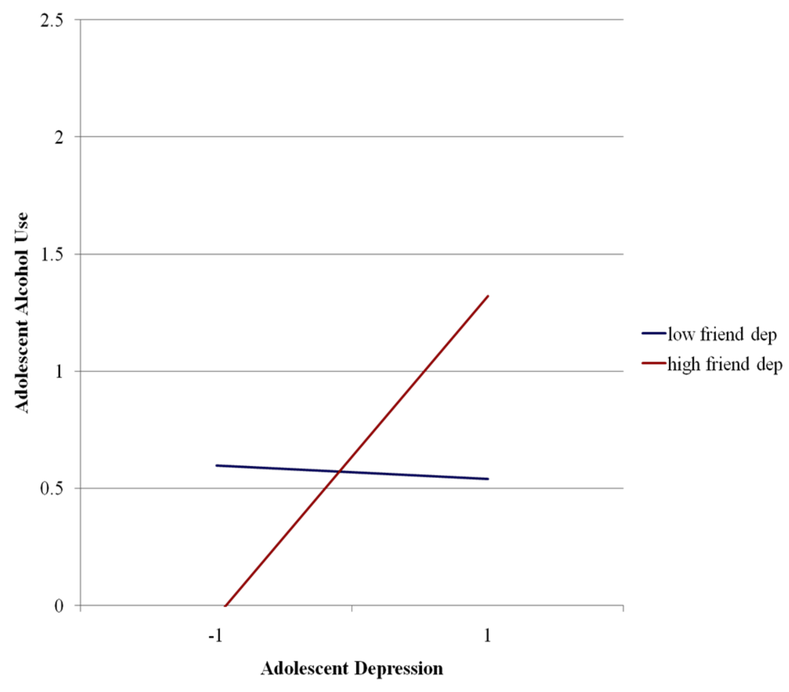
Using hierarchical multiple regression, we found a significant three-way interaction of peer depression, adolescent depression and peer substance use on adolescent alcohol use (B=0.12, p<.01) .

Plotting of this significant interaction showed that greater adolescent depression predicted higher risk for drinking among adolescents' whose friends engaged in greater drinking (whether or not these friends were depressed) and whose friends reported less drinking and greater depression.

However, adolescent depression was unrelated to drinking among those teens with friends reporting low levels of drinking and depression.

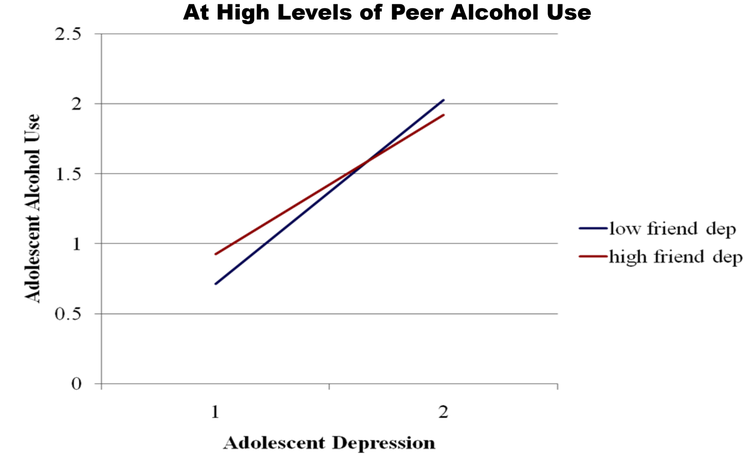
Interaction of Peer Depression, Peer Alcohol Use, and Adolescent Alcohol Use:

At Low Levels of Peer Alcohol Use



Interaction of Peer Depression, Peer Alcohol Use, and Adolescent Alcohol Use:

At High Levels of Peer Alcohol Use



Conclusions

Adolescents who have peers that are depressed or are substance users show greater risk for substance use with increasing negative affect.

Although much work has focused on the mechanisms underlying risk associated with peers' alcohol use, little research has addressed that associated with peers' depression. Different mechanisms may account for risk associated with these various risk factors. A potential mechanism deserving of more attention is social contagion of drinking motives, such as self-medication.

Future studies should test this mechanism more directly through the incorporation of a longitudinal design and more informative methods.

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