College students rarely seek help despite serious substance use problems

MAJOR FINDINGS:

Many college students suffer from substance use disorders (SUD). It is rare that college students with SUD recognize they need help or actually seek help for their substance use problems, although most attempt behavior change on their own. Pressure from parents, friends, or others is associated with help-seeking although rates of help-seeking escalate significantly when self-recognition of a need for help occurs. College students who do seek help tend to look to educational programs first, followed by professional resources and twelve-step programs.

Researchers confirmed previous findings of widespread substance use problems on college campuses with large proportions of college students meeting criteria for SUD. Annual prevalence of SUD increased from 23.6% of students in their first year to 35.0% in their third year, with nearly one-half of students (46.8%) meeting criteria for alcohol or marijuana SUD at least once during their first three years as undergraduates (see Table).

Third-year college students were asked about what, if anything, motivated them to seek help or treatment for substance use problems since beginning college. Help-seeking was rare among the 548 SUD cases identified (8.8%), but was significantly higher among individuals who experienced social pressure from parents (32.5%), friends (34.2%), or another person (58.3%). Only 3.6% perceived a need for help—meaning they thought they needed help or treatment for their substance use problems—but help-seeking was considerably higher among those students (90.0%).

The researchers asked the students if they had wanted or tried to cut back or stop drinking alcohol in the past year and whether they had wanted or tried to set limits on how much or how often they would drink, and if those attempts were successful. Responses to these questions were used as indicators of self-change behaviors, meaning the student had made at least some attempt on their own to change their substance use behavior. In most cases, self-change behaviors were attempted at least once, either successfully (36.3%) or unsuccessfully (54.2%), whereas only 9.5% never attempted any self-change.

Of major interest to:
✓ College Administrators
✓ Parents
☐ Educators
✓ Health Professionals
☐ Students
☐ Law and Policy Makers

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Practice and Policy Suggestions: The results of this study highlight the need to better understand what motivates young adults to seek help or treatment for a substance use disorder. Armed with a better understanding of the motivations behind seeking treatment, health professionals and campus administrators will be able to identify and reach out to students in need of help. Early intervention opportunities could include educational programs to improve problem recognition and desire to change by students with SUD. The programs could also be designed to help students recognize SUD in their friends and peers. A wider range of on-campus help options is also suggested, including treatment and use of brief interventions, which have been exhaustively studied and found appropriate for college students when used by trained professionals. On-line helping tools are suggested for a population shown to be treatment-averse and secretive. For parents of college students, the same educational efforts are suggested along with helping tools stressing the importance of maintaining the parent-child connection even into college.