

Social Norms

96% of UW-Madison first year students said they respect and honor a student's decision to be a nondrinker

89% of UW-Madison first year students said they would intervene if they thought a person was too impaired to give consent or was at risk for being sexually assaulted.

85% of UW-Madison first year students would intervene if they witnessed someone being harassed by another intoxicated individual or group.

90% of UW-Madison first year students agreed they are most certain of their partners consent when both parties are sober.

Source **Data from UW-Madison AlcoholEDU, 2021**

Social Norms are:

- Beliefs or actions
- Unspoken rules about what is normal for a group or situation
- Usually learned through observation; not often taught formally

Principles of Social Norms Theory:

- An individual's perceptions of social norms for their group influence the individual's behavior/beliefs within a group
- Perceptions of norms may be *accurate* or *misperceived*
- Individuals tend to *overestimate* the prevalence of unhealthy behaviors/beliefs and *underestimate* the prevalence of healthier behaviors/beliefs.
- If an unhealthy behavior/belief is perceived to be the norm for the group, the social urge to conform will influence members to adopt those behaviors/beliefs.
- The social norms approach strives to support healthy behavior by providing normative feedback about what the majority of the group actually thinks or does (i.e. clarify norms, correct misperceptions).

Two Types of Social Norms:

- **Descriptive:** perception of others' behavior (e.g. perceptions of how much or how often group members consume alcohol)
- **Injunctive:** perception of others' attitudes (e.g. perceptions of the extent to which group members consider alcohol consumption to be acceptable, cool, a positive experience, etc.)

Two Types of Misperceptions:

- **Pluralistic Ignorance:** incorrect belief that one's private attitudes, judgments or behavior are different from others
- **False Consensus:** incorrect belief that one represents the majority when he or she is actually in the minority

Misperceptions and Bystander Behavior:

- Individuals are bothered by problem behaviors, but *underestimate* others' discomfort with them *and desire to have someone intervene* (Pluralistic Ignorance).
- Interventions are *more likely to occur* when others are perceived as willing to intervene.

- Problem individuals use the misperception *to justify their behavior* (False Consensus).

For More Information:

Alan Berkowitz, co-created theory in 1986 with Wesley Perkins. <http://www.alanberkowitz.com/>

National Social Norms Institute, Frequently Asked Questions about the Social Norms Approach
<http://socialnormsinstitute.com/FAQ/questions.php>

Higher Education Center Resources

<http://www.higheredcenter.org/environmental-management/change/normative/social-norms>

Adapted from the University of Central Missouri