

PREVENTION STRATEGIES FOR SUBSTANCE MISUSE

**When Scare Tactics Don't Work
and How We Can Move Forward**

Carlie J. Sloan & Grace Kindt

WHAT ARE SCARE TACTICS / FEAR APPEALS?

What comes to mind when you hear “scare tactics” and “fear appeals” in substance use prevention?

Definition: Scare tactics, fear appeals and fear-based messaging are strategies designed to produce fear in order to persuade someone to change a behavior or avoid initiating a behavior

WHAT ARE SCARE TACTICS / FEAR APPEALS?

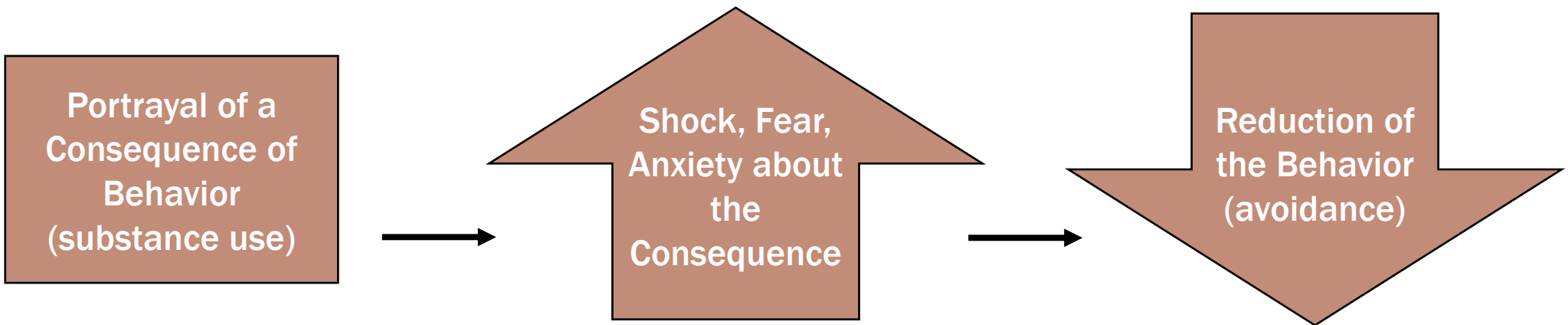
Definition: Scare tactics, fear appeals and fear-based messaging are strategies designed to produce fear in order to persuade someone to change a behavior or avoid initiating a behavior

Examples:

- Mock car crashes
- Gruesome images
- Graphic depiction of death and drug use
- Stories of how substance use ruined someone's life
- Images to produce shock and disgust (e.g., image of oral cancer)

**WHAT BROUGHT US
HERE?**

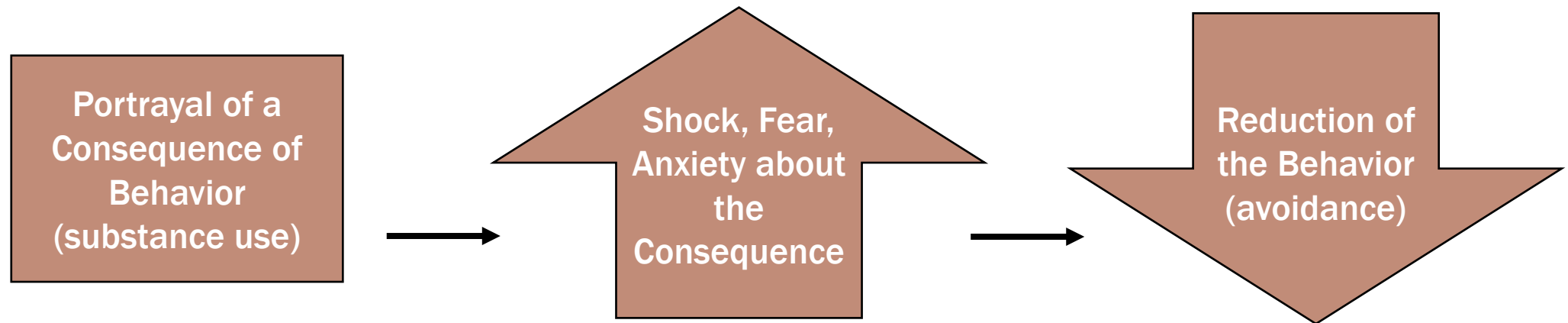
THEORETICAL BASIS



LITERATURE REVIEW FINDINGS

- Mixed findings (positive, null, and iatrogenic effects found)
- May work in the short-term to impact attitudes
 - Long-term assessments of behavior change are lacking or inconclusive
- Scare / Fear appeals rarely work at a universal level
 - Multiple *moderating* effects as well as *conditions* that must be met to work
- General study limitations (e.g., single timepoint, no experimental manipulation)

ASSUMPTIONS OF THEORY



- People feel shock, fear, or anxiety about the consequence
- People believe the consequence is a result of the behavior
- People believe the consequence is likely to happen to them if they continue the behavior
- People believe that stopping / avoiding the behavior will alleviate risk of the consequence
- People believe that stopping the behavior is the only way to alleviate the risk of the consequence
- People believe they are capable of stopping the behavior

THREATS TO EFFECTIVENESS: INDUCING APPROPRIATE FEAR / THREAT

- **The message must induce shock, fear, or anxiety about the consequence**
- **Exaggerated claims can lead to loss of credibility**
- **However, too much anxiety could lead to**
 - **Denial**
 - **Avoidance**
 - **For some, turning to substance use as coping mechanism for stress**

THREATS TO EFFECTIVENESS: BELIEFS ABOUT CONSEQUENCES

- People must believe the consequence will result from the behavior
 - E.g., I agree that smoking causes lung cancer; I believe those who drive drunk are at risk for getting in car accidents
 - This is difficult to do in a short statement, image, or advertisement
- People must believe the consequence is likely to happen to them
 - Termed *susceptibility*
 - Often, people do not believe severe consequences like death or illness are likely to happen to them (“that only happens to other people, not to me”)
 - Difficult to appeal to a diverse audience (ages, genders, histories of substance use)
 - Young people in particular are more influenced by short-term and cosmetic consequences, rather than serious threats (e.g., bad breath, yellow teeth)

THREATS TO EFFECTIVENESS: BELIEFS ABOUT STOPPING BEHAVIOR

- **People must believe stopping the behavior will alleviate the risk of the consequence**
 - **E.g., I believe that quitting smoking will reduce my risk of lung cancer**
- **People must believe stopping the behavior is the only way to alleviate the risk**
 - **E.g., I believe quitting smoking is the best / only way to avoid getting lung cancer**

THREATS TO EFFECTIVENESS: ABILITY TO STOP THE BEHAVIOR

- People must believe they are capable of stopping the behavior
 - *Self-Efficacy*
 - This is greatly increased when an alternative behavior is recommended
- Different histories of substance use will still affect how effective messaging is
 - Messaging about quitting won't have same impact for those who have never used the substance
 - Messaging about not initiating use will not have same impact on current users

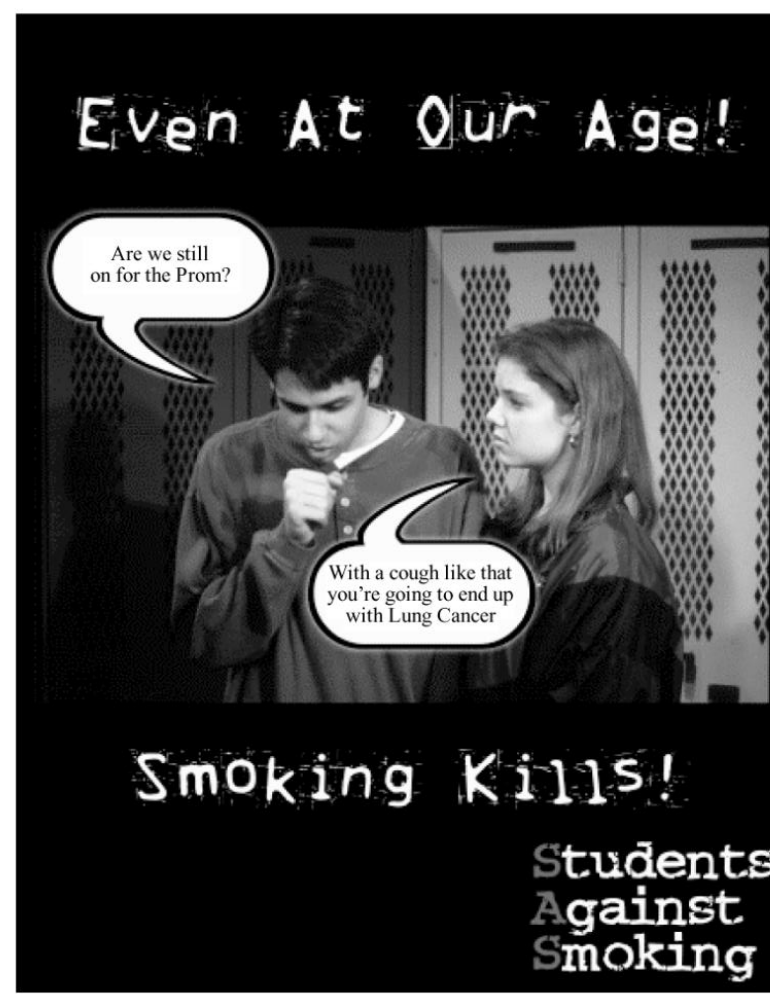
WHEN FEAR APPEALS (MIGHT) WORK

- Use factual, not exaggerated content
 - Exaggerating consequences could prompt denial, avoidance
- Use consequences that are likely (e.g., “smoking gives you yellow teeth” vs. “smoking causes lung cancer”)
 - *Susceptibility* has to be high
- Provide healthy behaviors as an alternative
- Ensure the alternative behavior will remove the consequence / fear
 - E.g., “You can avoid getting a DUI by getting a ride home with a friend”
- Ensure the alternative behaviors are achievable
 - E.g., “Getting a ride home is easy!” [provide list of cab numbers/ride share services, including links]
 - *Self-efficacy* has to be high

EXAMPLES

What's missing in these examples of fear appeals?

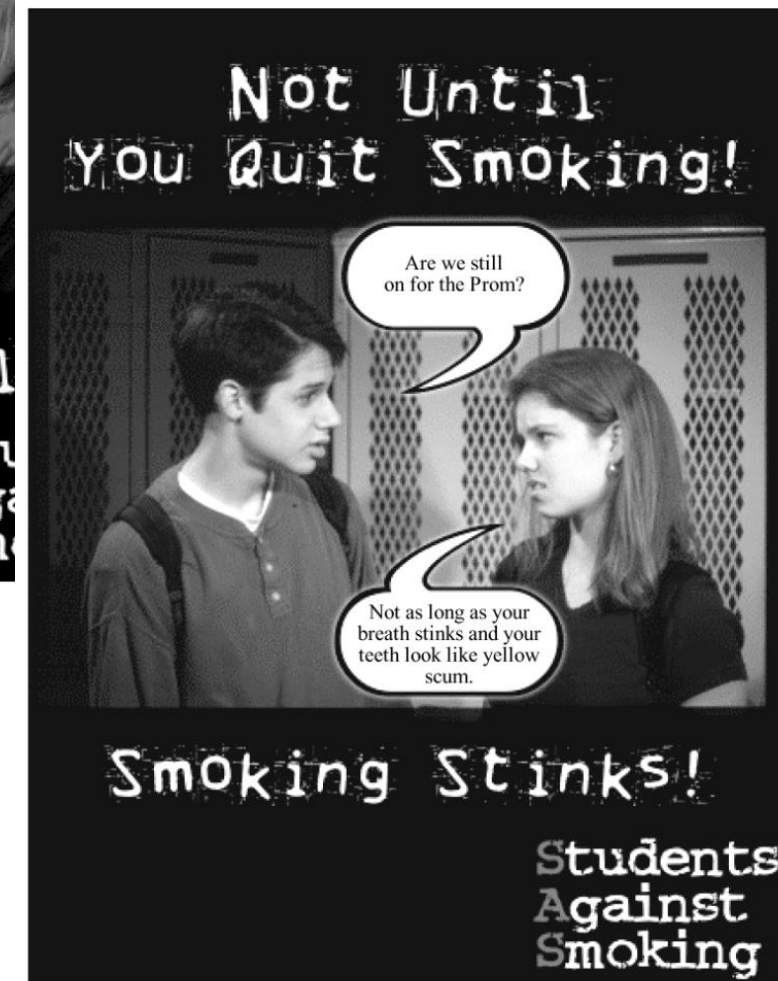
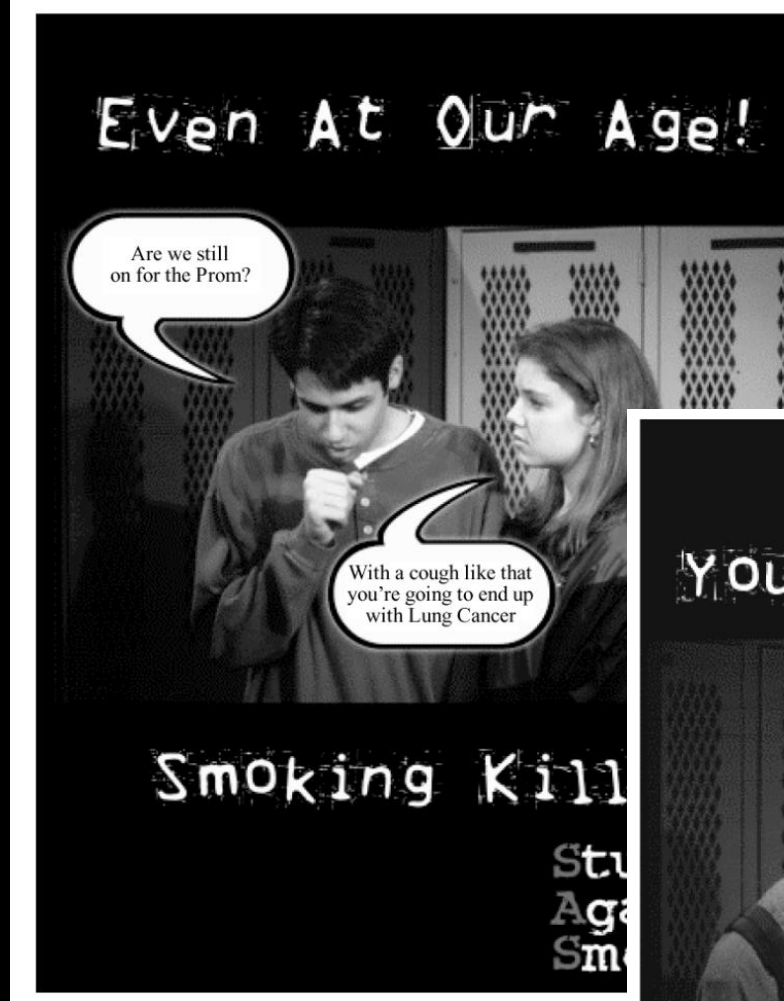
ANTI-SMOKING



ANTI-SMOKING

Reminder: conditions to be met

- Use factual, not exaggerated content
- Use consequences that are likely
- Provide healthy behaviors as an alternative
- Ensure the alternative behavior will remove the consequence / fear
- Ensure the alternative behaviors are achievable



MOCK CAR CRASH



Images retrieved from Google Images

MOVING FORWARD

What challenges or successes have you faced in this area?

COMING SOON!

Document on additional strategies to avoid (e.g., information only, DUI simulators, drunk goggles)

Alternatives / Solutions, for example...

- Refusal skills training
- Peer / Social Norms approaches
 - Acknowledging the lived experience and pressures of young people
- Positive reinforcement strategies