Adolescent and Young Adult Health Risk Behaviors Lab
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Why are so many teens and young adults struggling with overweight?
What is it about the college environment that promotes weight gain?
How does alcohol contribute to “the Freshman 15”?
Why do some adolescents cut themselves?
What can they do – or their parents do – to help themselves recover?
Can therapy dogs really help reduce stress among college students?

These are just some of the questions we’ve asked – and studied – in our lab. The primary goal of our research lab is to gain a better understanding of the factors that contribute to why people engage in behaviors that are unhealthy and harmful to them and to translate this knowledge gained into better methods for assessing and treating these behaviors. We use a range of complementary methodologies (e.g., online surveys, face-to-face interviews, school-based studies, randomized treatment studies) to better understand how these behaviors develop, how to predict them, and how to help manage them. Recent and ongoing projects are described below.

Who am I?
I am an Associate Professor of Psychology at the University of Massachusetts Dartmouth. I am also a licensed Clinical Psychologist with specialized training in Health Psychology and adolescent health risk behaviors. I have extensive experience in developing and conducting treatments that promote healthful behaviors in adolescents and young adults, particularly in the areas of weight loss, physical activity, smoking cessation, and non-suicidal self-injury. I have authored over 50 papers and book chapters on these topics, and have obtained both federal and private funding to study these topics.

My Vision of Training Student Researchers
I maintain an active clinical research lab with graduate and undergraduate students. I have a strong interest in assisting students with gaining clinical research experiences and involving them in meaningful community-based research projects. While not every student is interested or capable of completing a two-semester honors sequence, there are many ways that students can get involved in research. These could involve periodic volunteer work, a semester-long independent study designed to meet the needs and interests of both student and myself, experiential learning credit, and honors thesis work. Regardless of the option chosen, I believe it is important to establish early on collaboration between student and faculty that allows for both to grow and learn from one another.

Ongoing Projects
Understanding non-suicidal self-injury behavior:

Brief description: Non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) is the deliberate, self-inflicted destruction of body tissue (e.g., cutting, burning) without suicidal intent and for purposes not socially sanctioned. Although not a new phenomenon, NSSI prevalence among adolescents and young adults is high and broadly distributed across both community and psychiatric samples. It is a strong risk factor for suicide and is associated with a host of psychological difficulties and disorders. Our work in this area focuses on better understanding the functions that self-injury serves for a particular individual, and how to best help teens, young adults – and their parents – to grow from and move beyond self-injury.

Sample publications and manuscripts in preparation: *please note that student authors are indicated in bold.
What are we up to this year? This year, we have two graduate students embarking on thesis work relating to self-injury. One study will involve surveying undergraduate students here at UMass Dartmouth and then running a small treatment study involving physical activity. Another study will involve conducting analyses on data collected from eight colleges on undergraduates' health risk behaviors. I will also be continuing work on a book for parents of teens who self-injure.

College weight gain and the role of alcohol use:

Brief description: While research suggests a majority (50-75%) of students do indeed gain weight during their freshman year, average weight gain is often on the order of 5-7 pounds. Over 50% of college students report recent binge drinking, with two out of every five students binge drinking on a regular basis. Indeed, college freshmen who endorsed frequent moderate to high-risk drinking were more likely to gain weight during their first semester of college than non-drinkers or low-risk drinkers (Lloyd-Richardson et al., 2008). Specifically, these drinkers were more likely to report increased appetite and overeating episodes after drinking, and higher overall levels of cognitive restraint around their eating.

Sample publications and manuscripts in preparation: *please note that student authors are indicated in bold.


What are we up to this year? We have some very interesting data from a study we conducted that aimed to reduce weight gain among a sample of UMass Dartmouth women who were heavy drinkers. This study needs to be readied for publication and submitted to a journal for review.

Treatment of Adolescent Overweight and Obesity:

Brief description: My first exposure to research involved providing therapy in a large weight loss trial for overweight children in Louisiana. I have worked in this area for more than 20 years and am always learning something new. Recent work has involved local collaboration with the New Bedford Track Club and the Boys & Girls Club to develop an after-school program designed to get kids running and improving their health.

Sample publications and manuscripts in preparation: *please note that student authors are indicated in bold.

What are we up to this year? My colleague, Brian Ayotte, PhD., and I will be working on submitting this project for grant funding. Once we have some funding, we'll be looking to get started with rolling out The Running Academy to local at-risk teens.

**The Role of Animal-Assisted Therapy in Health:**

**Brief description:** The past couple of years I have had a growing interest in evaluating the use of animal-assisted therapies for reducing stress and improving health. We know that therapy dogs are often used in various settings, but do they really improve health? We’re using science to help inform this discussion.

**Sample publications and manuscripts in preparation:** *please note that student authors are indicated in bold.*


What are we up to this year? We have one student continuing this line of research, with a project that involves interviewing families who have a child with autism about the role that their family dog plays in the life of their child. There is so much that can be done in this really fun area!

**Current lab members:**

**Graduate Students**
Nicole Hayes
Angela DiBenedetto
Briana Paulo

**Undergraduate Students**
Alex Costa
Charlene Reyes

If you are interested in joining the lab, please contact Dr. Richardson at erichardson@umassd.edu for an interview.