

Fear Appeals in Prevention:

Considerations and Alternatives for Working with
Youth and Partners



MPRC is funded by the MN Department of Human Services Behavioral Health
Administration and Hosted by the Association for Nonsmokers -MN.

What are fear appeals?

prevention strategies that are generally considered ineffective and rely on scaring a youth into avoiding a risk behavior.

Source: adapted from Prevention Tools: What Works, What Doesn't,
<https://www.dshs.wa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/documents/22-1662.pdf>

Where have you seen scare tactics show up in your work?

How do people feel about them? What do you hear people say?

Research shows using fear appeals

to prevent adolescent substance use:

- Does not lead to positive behavior change
- Can increase risky behavior by modeling it
- Is least effective among those most susceptible to risky behavior
- Can create psychological harm
- May trigger stress by creating an environment that resembles a past harm/traumatic experience

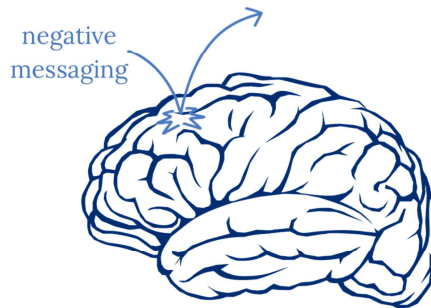
Any approach that utilizes shame, or associates moral value with substance use, can create harm, especially among youth.

Source: adapted from Prevention Tools: What Works, What Doesn't

(<https://www.dshs.wa.gov/sites/default/files/publications/documents/22-1662.pdf>)

Source: Psychology today, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/emotional-nourishment/2021/01/fear-appeals>

The Adolescent Brain



- Risk-taking & impulsivity
- Disconnect between actions and consequences (compared to adults)

Source: Prevention Action Alliance,

<https://dam.assets.ohio.gov/image/upload/mha.ohio.gov/SupportingProviders/TrainingandReCommunications/1045-am-Understanding-SUD-Prevention-and-Why-Scare-Tactics-Dont.pdf>

Source: International Journal of Psychology, <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/24811878/>, where messaging is less impactful to those who need to hear it, defensiveness

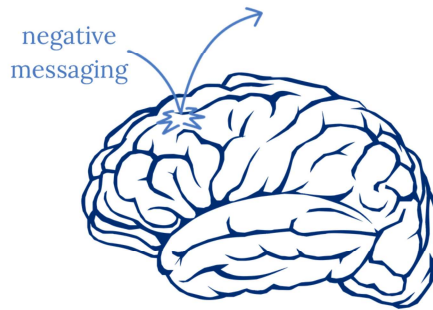
Source: Columbia University Medical Center, <https://www.cuimc.columbia.edu/news/emotion-brain3-4s-fear-response-discovered>

Source: Deborah Yurgelun-Todd, PBS,

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/teenbrain/interviews/todd.html>

Source: National Institute of Mental Health, <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/news/science-updates/less-discerning-of-threat-vs-safety-more-vulnerable-to-stress>

The Adolescent Brain



→**denial:** *"It won't happen to me"*

→**avoidance:** *"This is just too scary to think about"*

→**countering with skepticism:**
"They're trying to manipulate me" "I know people that use and they are fine"

→**message mocking:** *"This is your brain on drugs...with a side of bacon."*

Source: Prevention Action Alliance,

<https://dam.assets.ohio.gov/image/upload/mha.ohio.gov/SupportingProviders/TrainingandReCommunications/1045-am-Understanding-SUD-Prevention-and-Why-Scare-Tactics-Dont.pdf>

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Why are fear appeals used?

- Emotions are powerful tools
- Youth often have strong reactions to fear appeals, self-report their value
- Often involve powerful stories, that lead to the formation of strong opinions in community

How to start conversations about fear appeals

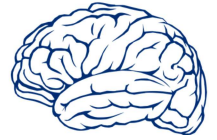


Source: Source: adapted from What Does NOT Work in Prevention, <https://pttcnetwork.org/ce/pttc/what-does-not-work-prevention>

What have conversations about fear appeals in your organizations & communities looked like?

How did it go? What worked well/not well?

What to use instead?



1. Tap into critical thinking
2. Strategies that emphasize skill-building
3. Teach preventative behaviors and positive alternatives

hint: you might already be doing these things!

Source: Prevention Action Alliance

<https://dam.assets.ohio.gov/image/upload/mha.ohio.gov/SupportingProviders/TrainingandReCommunications/1045-am-Understanding-SUD-Prevention-and-Why-Scare-Tactics-Dont.pdf>

Source: Education Week, <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/for-drug-prevention-scare-tactics-whats-in/2023/01>



tinyurl.com/PTTOnline

blueprintsprograms.org

samhsa.gov/libraries/evidence-based-practices-resource-center

evidencebasedprograms.org

**fear alone does not change
behavior**

Factsheet download



mnprc.org/resources/starting-conversations-about-fear-appeals-in-youth-substance-misuse-prevention

STARTING CONVERSATIONS ABOUT FEAR APPEALS IN YOUTH SUBSTANCE MISUSE PREVENTION:

what are fear appeals, why don't they work, and what should we use instead?

fear appeals

(strategy, ineffective) | see also: scare tactics
prevention strategies that are generally considered ineffective and rely on scaring a youth into avoiding a risk behavior.
e.g., mock car crashes, drunk driving simulators, drunk goggles
Source: adapted from O'Connell, Dale, et al. (2010, 2012, 2013)

Research shows strategies like mock car crashes...

- do not lead to positive behavior change;
- can increase risky behavior by modeling it;
- are least effective among those most susceptible to risky behavior;
- create psychological trauma; and
- may trigger stress by creating an environment that resembles a previous trauma.

Source: adapted from O'Connell, Dale, et al. (2010, 2012, 2013)

While fear appeals sometimes lead to changes in perceptions or behavior, they are far less effective than strategies that model skills and intentions to limit risk behavior. Fear appeals can cause trauma and harm, and often do not lead to any positive changes.

Source: Adapted from O'Connell, Dale, et al. (2010, 2012, 2013)

Q: Why do many MN communities still use strategies like mock car crashes and drunk driving simulations?

As Emotions are powerful, and youth often have strong reactions to fear appeals. While this doesn't prove their effectiveness, communities members who have seen these strategies in action over time may have strong opinions and powerful stories that inform their perspectives about how well fear appeals work. It is important to identify why members of your community are interested in a particular strategy before you work together to find a new one.

MNPRC is funded by the MN Department of Human Services - Behavioral Health Administration

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access at: mnprc.org/resources/starting-conversations-about-fear-appeals-in-youth-substance-misuse-prevention

Contact

Madeline Bremel, MPH

Program Director, Minnesota

Prevention Resource Center (MPRC)

madeline@ansrmn.org



mnprc.org



visit our resource library

mnprc.org/resources



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madeline@ansrmn.org

mnprc.org

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Rethinking the Mock Crash Unintended Harm, Unclear Impact

Patti Smith
Kanabec County Community Health



Public Health
Prevent. Promote. Protect.

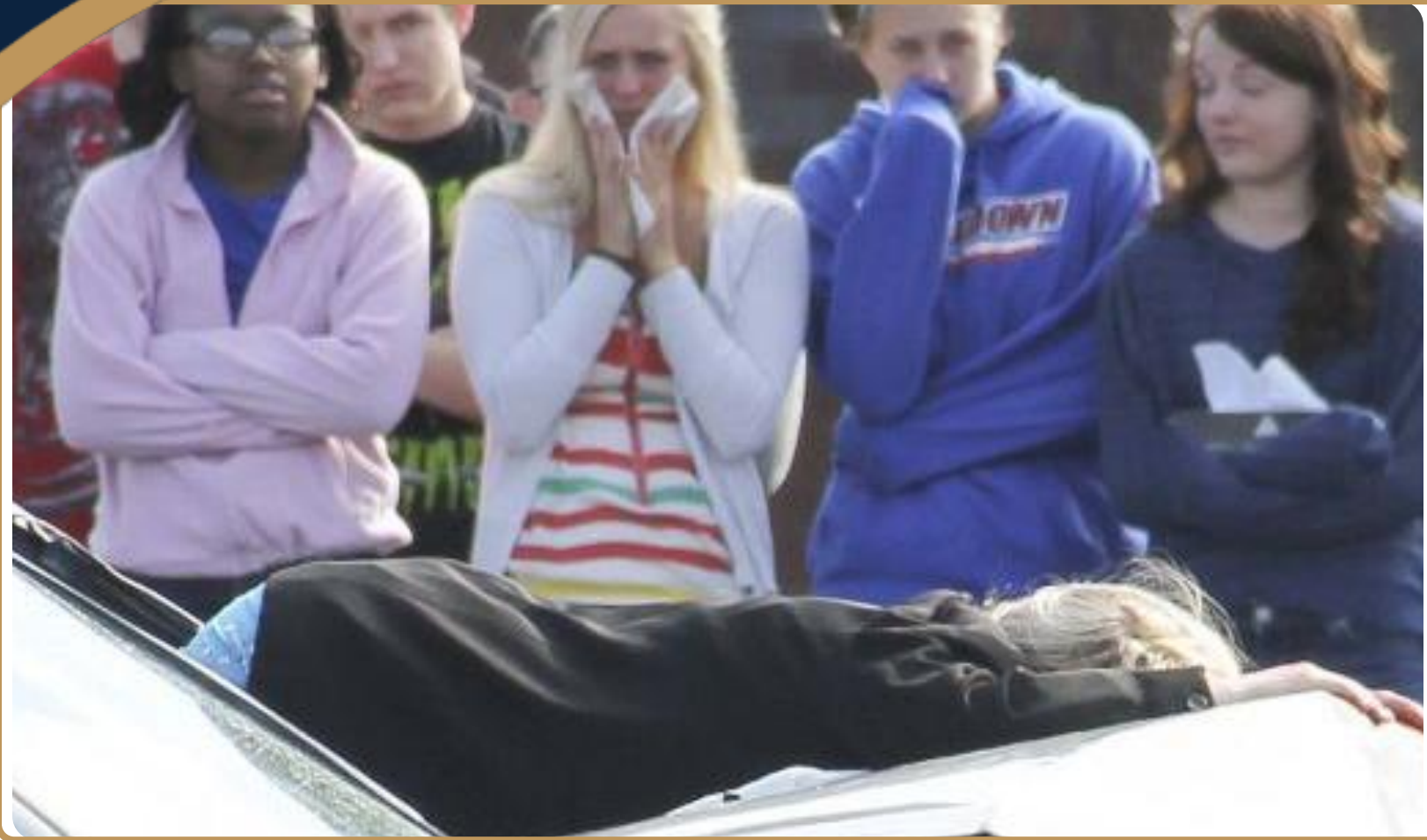
Kanabec County Community Health



Minnesota Schools hosting Mock Crashes...

Anoka, St. Michael/Albertville, Forest Lake, Braham, Pine City, Alexandria, Hill City, St Cloud, Albert Lea, Monticello, White Bear Lake, Brainerd...

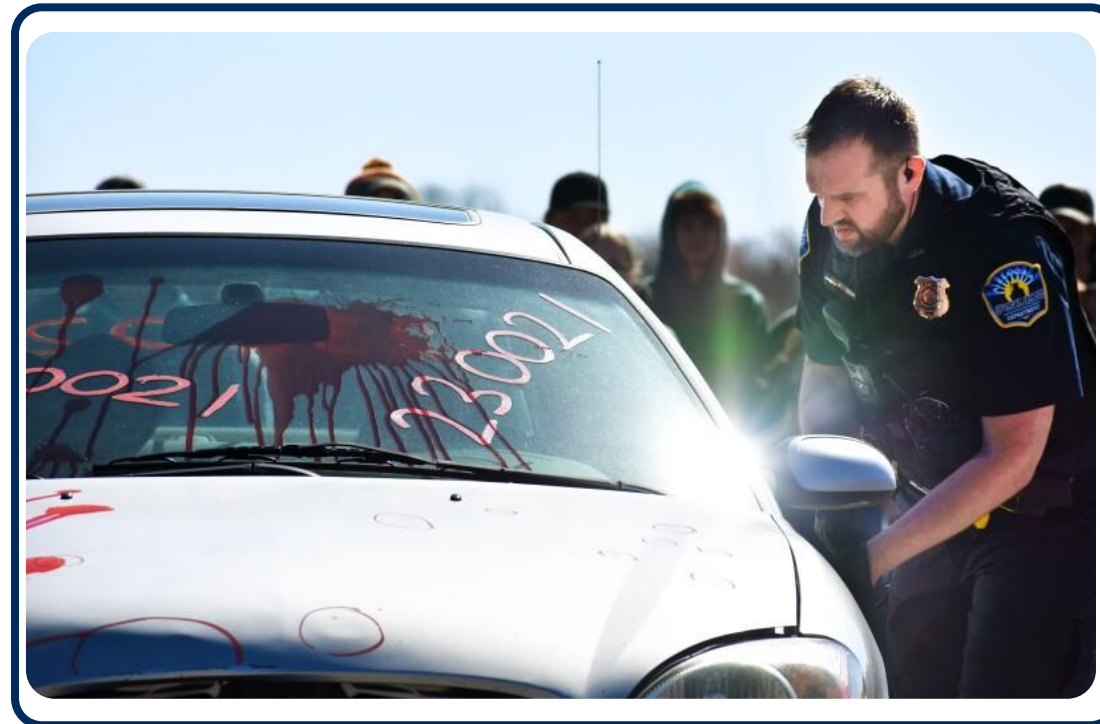




“Teens shocked...”



“We Need Mock Crashes, Now More than Ever”



“...forefront of their brain so that they are reminded to be safe”

Emotional Impact & Potential Harm

What does the data say?

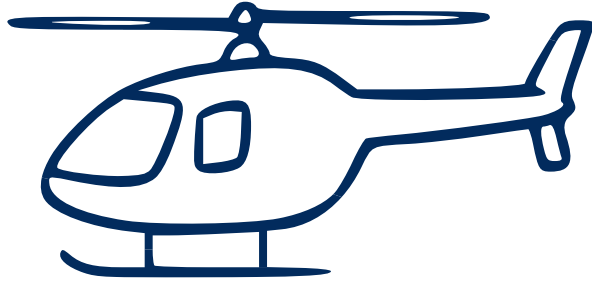
Resources...



Cost...

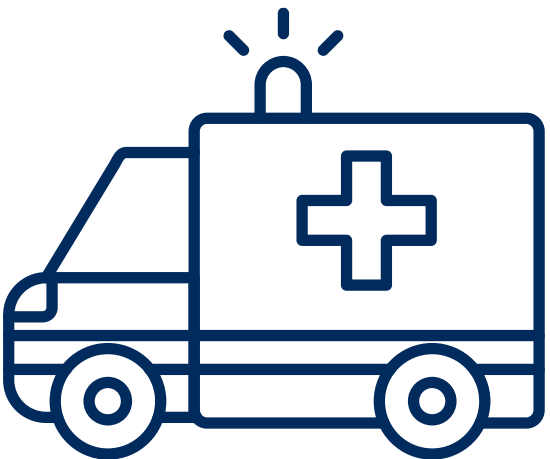


Cost of Mock Crash



Pilots

Air Ambulance= \$12k – \$25k



EMT/EMS

Ambulance + Hospital Staff \$25 p/hr = \$500
In rural areas it takes a rig out of service for several hours.



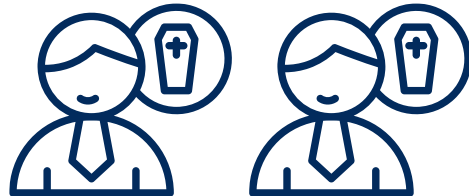
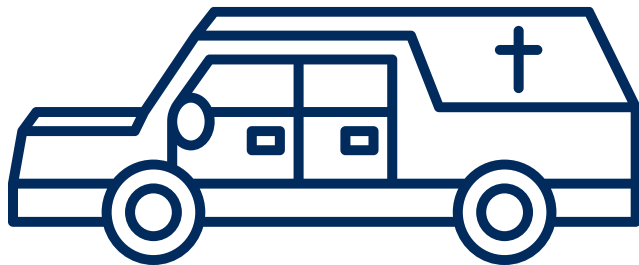
Law Enforcement

Law Enforcement pay \$30-\$50 p/hr = \$650
In rural areas it takes a LE out of service for several hours.



Local Fire/Rescue Agencies

Fire Fighter Paid and/or Volunteer Rate \$38 p/hr = \$1000



Funeral Home

Mortuary Staff \$38 p/hr = \$350



Student Actors



Students, Staff,
Facilities Rental,
Parent
Communication,
etc. = \$?

*based on 4 hour of service

Alternatives

Call to action

Thank you!

Patti Smith

Public Health Supervisor

Patti.Smith@KanabecCountyMN.gov

Ph. 763.245.7886

Kanabec County Community Health



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