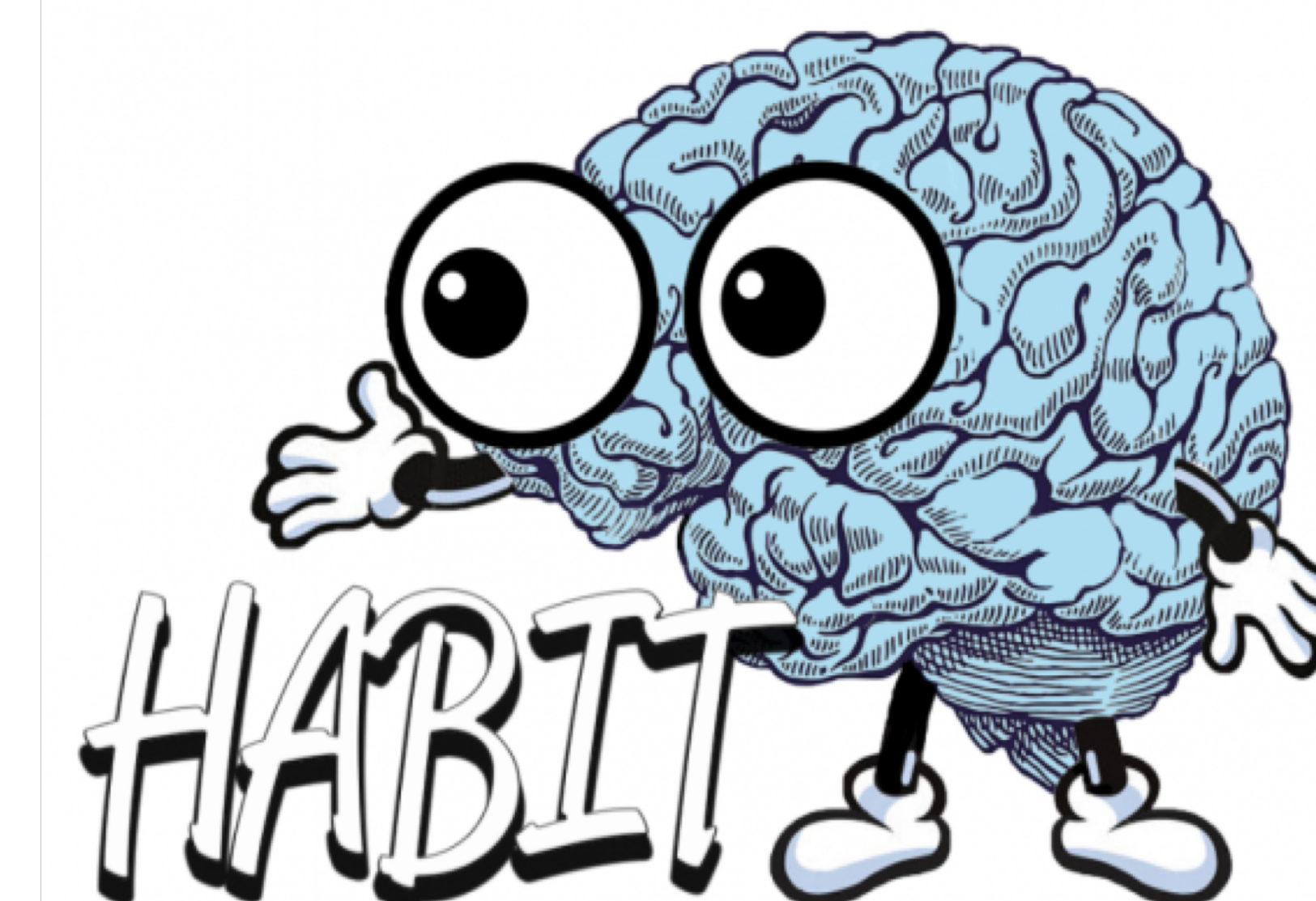# Healthy Ways of Coping with Internalizing Traits

Makenzie Houston, Maya Pilin & Marvin Krank

Introduction

- **The HABIT curriculum**
  - Healthy Automatic Behaviors, Intentions and Thoughts is a pilot program intended to develop a curriculum which educates grade 6 and 7 students on how to make healthy life choices and achieve their goals
  - The main goal of the curriculum is to prevent substance use and abuse issues later in life
  - Selective, personality based drug use prevention lessons have been proven to be more effective and less costly than previous, universal prevention programs (Castellanos-Ryan et al., 2013; Conrod et al., 2013; Goossens et al., 2015; Lammers et al, 2015; Lammers et al., 2017; Newton et al., 2016; O'Leary-Barrett & Conrod, 2016)

- **The personality traits**
  - The **internalizing traits** of anxiety sensitivity and negative thinking have been shown to be predictive of risky substance use as adolescents and young adults turn to substances as a way of coping with their overwhelming thoughts and emotions.
  - **Anxiety Sensitivity** – the fear of the feelings, behaviors or sensations associated with anxiety
  - **Negative Thinking** – low mood, negative beliefs about oneself and the world
  - By providing students with the ability to identify the feelings and thoughts that may lead to unhealthy coping and knowledge of alternative healthy coping strategies, the rate of healthy choices is likely to increase

- **Research Questions:**
  - Is it feasible to develop a drug use prevention program for this age group?
  - Will this program have an impact on drug use in later teenaged years?

Expected Results

- The most important result we hope to find is an increase in the age of onset of substance use. A number of at-risk students are already engaging in risky behavior in grade 8-10. By creating coping lessons tailored to younger students, we expect to reduce this number

- Consistent with the findings in previous studies, a reduction in binge drinking, drinking related problems and drinking frequency in adolescence is expected (Conrod et al., 2013; O'Leary-Barrett & Conrod, 2016; Lammers et al., 2017; Newton et al., 2016)

- A reduction in the prevalence of anxiety disorder and depression among these adolescents is also expected as anxiety sensitivity and negative thinking are often precursors to these disorders if no intervention is attempted

Methods

- A literature review was conducted of similar personality based coping lessons for children using the PSYCHINFO database

- The **PREVENTURE** curriculum
  - A selective drug use prevention curriculum for students in grade 8-10
  - Has been tested in Canada, the UK and Australia
  - Consistently resulting in a reduction in binge drinking, drinking related problems and drinking frequency
  - Because of the consistent effectiveness of this program, the coping lesson portion of the HABIT curriculum will be modelled after it

(Conrod, P. & Stewart, S. 2012)

- **Bibliotherapy**
  - The use of stories whether in the form of fictional books, or real-life examples was prevalent in all prevention lessons researched
  - The stories provide children with examples of situations in which their personality trait may be expressed in an unhealthy manner
  - Students can identify with the characters and learn from their mistakes or successes without feeling self-conscious about needing to disclose information about their personal daily struggles

Lesson Example – Negative Thinking

- We first provide them with a story about our character Taylor who becomes sad and withdraws from his group of friends when they adopt a new friend because he begins to feel like his friends must hate him and do not want to bee around him anymore
- Once the stage is set, we present the decision box as a great way to work through tough decisions where they will identify the short and long term positive and negative effects of Taylors coping strategy
- They will then be challenged to come up with a more effective coping strategy for Taylor and to complete another decision box

Short-term positive	Long-term positive
Short-term negative	Long-term negative

Course Plan

- **Psycho-education**
  - The curriculum with start by educating the students about their personality trait and the effects it may have on their decision making abilities
  - It will use short stories of events in a relatable peer's daily life to illustrate the cognitive distortions that lead to unhealthy thoughts and behaviors
  - The students will also identify scenarios in their own lives where their internalizing trait sent them into a negative spiral
  - They will practice pinpointing the specific thoughts that perpetuate the situation

- **Cognitive behavior therapy**
  - Through problem focused coping strategies students will learn to challenge their negative thought patterns to avoid the negative spiral
  - They will use decision boxes to identify the positive and negative short and long term consequences of the unhealthy coping strategies identified in the stories of their peer as well as their own stories
  - They will practice challenging their unhealthy thoughts by coming up with alternatives and identifying the benefits of these alternatives

- **Motivational interviewing**
  - In order to enhance motivation to participate in our group sessions and utilize the techniques in the future, each session will open with the review of a contract which ensures privacy and confidentiality within the group
  - The students will then complete a goal setting exercise where they identify what the hope to get out of the group with leading questions about how their internalizing trait has negatively effected their lives and what positive would come from learning how to deal with their feelings in a healthy manner

- **Art Therapy**
  - Art therapy has been shown to improve overall well-being, increase self-esteem, reduce loneliness and promote resilience in at risk youth
  - Exercises where students are asked to draw situations where they have felt their internalizing trait taking over, draw what they do to cope, and draw a comic strip where they challenge their negative thoughts will be included
  - This will be an interactive and creative way for the students to convey their thoughts without the pressure of writing them down