

New Tools to Identify At-Risk Youths

THE SOMETIMES-AWKWARD transition from adolescence to adulthood is a period of intense physical, mental, emotional and social change. While most young people can cope with these growing pains without much consequence, others may struggle and engage in harmful behavior to suppress their uncomfortable feelings.

Research in the university's School of Public Health may soon give counselors new tools to identify at-risk youths prone to negative behaviors like substance abuse, juvenile delinquency and unprotected sex.

Stacey Daughters, '98, M.A. '03, Ph.D. '05, assistant professor of public and community health and director of the Stress, Health and Addictions Research laboratory, is investigating the biological and psychological mechanisms underlying distress tolerance, which is the ability to tolerate intense emotional discomfort without reverting to avoidant or impulsive behavior.

"The substance abuse or other non-acceptable behaviors may be symptoms of a core emotional vulnerability we want to identify," says Daughters, who recently completed a distress intolerance assessment of 150 Prince George's County high school students ages 14 to 17.

"The school system can definitely benefit from new approaches to

early intervention at this critical stage of development for our youth," says Heather Iliff, a member of the Prince George's County Board of Education.

The project is funded by the National Institute of Drug Abuse and follows up on distress tolerance research Daughters is doing with recovering drug addicts and alcoholics at an inpatient treatment center in Washington, D.C.

The high school students played a series of computer games that involved adding numbers or tracing the outline of a star using the computer mouse. To increase stress, the task included forced failure in the form of a quickened pace followed by a loud buzzer. The students were told that the better they performed, the greater their reward at the end of the session—yet they also had the option to quit the task at any time.

Students who quit early (showing they had low distress tolerance) were also more likely to report drug or alcohol abuse and other harmful behaviors identified through a follow-up questionnaire.

The next step is to develop interventions. "If you can identify these kids right away with the tools that we have, and give them treatment, then that's the key," says Daughters.

—TV

