

Drinkers not only zone out -- but also are unaware that they do

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A new study out of the University of Pittsburgh suggests that a moderate dose of alcohol increases a person's mind wandering, while at the same time reducing the likelihood of noticing that one's mind has wandered.

The paper, titled "Lost in the Sauce: The Effects of Alcohol on Mind Wandering," explores this phenomenon and is published in this month's issue of [Psychological Science](#).

The study provides the first evidence that alcohol disrupts an individual's ability to realize his or her mind has wandered, suggesting impairment of a psychological state called meta-consciousness. These findings suggest that distinct processes are responsible for causing a thought to occur, as opposed to allowing its presence to be noticed.

Led by University of Pittsburgh professor of psychology Michael Sayette, researchers Erik Reichle, associate professor and chair of Pitt's cognitive program in psychology, and Jonathan Schooler, professor of psychology at University of California, Santa Barbara, studied a group of men—half of whom had consumed alcohol and half of whom had been given a [placebo](#). After 30 minutes, the participants began reading a portion of Tolstoy's War and Peace from a computer screen. If they caught themselves zoning out—having no idea what they had just read or thinking about something other than the text—they pressed a key on the keyboard. They also were prompted at intervals, to see if they could be "caught" mind-wandering before they realized it themselves.

The results revealed that while they were reading the text those who had consumed alcohol were mind-wandering without realizing it about 25 percent of the time—more than double that of those who had not consumed alcohol. But as far as "catching themselves" zoning out, those who had been drinking were no more likely to do so than the other group. Participants in the alcohol group would have had many more opportunities to catch themselves because they zoned out more often—but they did not. They were impaired in their ability to notice their own mind-wandering episodes.

"Researchers have known for a while that alcohol consumption can interfere with our limited-capacity powers of concentration," said Sayette. "But this "double-whammy,"(i.e., more zoneouts that take longer to recognize) may explain why alcohol often disrupts efforts to exercise self-control—a process requiring the ability to become aware of one's current state in order to regulate it."

These findings have potentially important implications for understanding the disruptive effects of alcohol. For example, the observation that alcohol increases mind-wandering suggests another reason why alcohol makes driving dangerous—drunk drivers may lose track of what they are doing.

Moreover, the finding that [alcohol](#) reduces meta-consciousness may explain why people drive when they are drunk—by reducing their ability to assess their current state, intoxicated people may fail to realize how intoxicated they are and thus inadequately appraise the danger of driving.

Source: University of Pittsburgh

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