

Large decline in impulsivity in early adulthood related to decrease in alcohol consumption

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Previous studies have found that the personality trait impulsivity, or a lack of planning and forethought regarding behaviors, is associated with alcohol use and alcohol-use disorders. For most individuals, impulsivity decreases during emerging and young adulthood. Some, however, do not "mature out" of impulsivity. Now, University of Missouri researchers have found that individuals who exhibited the largest declines in impulsivity from ages 18-25 also exhibited the sharpest decreases in alcohol consumption during this time frame. Understanding why some individuals "mature out" of impulsivity and others do not could lead to improved treatment for alcohol-use disorders.

"In the past, [psychologists](#) have viewed [impulsivity](#) as a consistent trait over a person's lifetime," said Andrew Littlefield, a doctoral student in clinical psychology and lead author on the paper. "Now, there is growing evidence that there are pronounced changes during emerging and young adulthood, roughly from the ages 18 to 35. Our study found that there are substantial individual differences in personality change. These differences appear to relate to the range of alcohol use measures and alcohol-related problems."

Researchers used data from a [longitudinal study](#) of individuals at risk for [alcohol dependence](#). The individuals were assessed at ages 18, 25, 29 and 35 using self-reported measures of personality and alcohol involvement starting their freshman year of college. From this information,

researchers were able to measure the differences in level, stability and change in impulsivity and how it related to [alcohol consumption](#). The researchers used the measures to cluster individuals who exhibited similar patterns of personality stability and change during the 17-year timeline.

"These findings provide clear evidence that at least some individuals undergo significant changes in impulsivity across time," Littlefield said.

In the future, the researchers hope to determine why individuals exhibit individual differences in impulsivity. By examining the relationships between the clusters and alcohol use, they hope to gain a better understanding of the other factors that might promote or inhibit impulsivity development.

"Future studies could examine why some individuals make significant changes in impulsivity across time whereas other individuals' level of impulsivity remains relatively stable," Littlefield said. "Identifying factors that enhance or inhibit seemingly beneficial changes in personality may inform treatment approaches that could facilitate decreased impulsivity. Changes in [personality](#) have been previously linked to several life and work experiences, including relationship and work satisfaction."

More information: The study, "Developmental Trajectories of Impulsivity and their Association with Alcohol Use and Related Outcomes During Emerging and Young Adulthood I," will be published in *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research* in August.

Provided by University of Missouri-Columbia

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