

# Rose-colored beer goggles: Social benefits of heavy drinking outweigh harms

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A study by University of Washington psychologists shows some people continue to drink heavily because of perceived positive effects, despite experiencing negative effects such as hangovers, fights and regrettable sexual situations.

According to participants in the study, boosts of courage, chattiness and other social benefits of [drinking](#) outweigh its harms, which they generally did not consider as strong deterrents.

The findings offer a new direction for programs targeting [binge drinking](#), which tend to limit their focus to avoiding alcohol's ill effects rather than considering its rewards.

"This study suggest why some people can experience a lot of bad consequences of drinking but not change their behavior," said Kevin King, co-author and UW assistant professor of psychology.

"People think, 'It's not going to happen to me' or 'I'll never drink that much again.' They do not seem to associate their own heavy drinking with negative consequences," he said.

The paper was published online May 30 in *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*.

Nearly 500 college students completed an online survey measuring their drinking habits during the previous year. The survey assessed how often

the participants had experienced 35 different negative consequences of drinking, such as blackouts, fights, hangovers, missed classes and work, and lost or stolen belongings, as well as 14 positive effects of drinking, including better conversational and joke-telling abilities, improved sexual encounters and more energy to stay up late partying and dancing.

The researchers also measured the participants' beliefs about how likely all of these drinking consequences would happen again and how positive or negative they were.

Participants rated the upsides to drinking as more positive and likely to happen in the future, a finding the researchers call "rose-colored beer goggles."

"It's as though they think that the good effects of drinking keep getting better and more likely to happen again," said Diane Logan, lead author and a UW clinical psychology graduate student.

Respondents' perceptions of drinking's negative consequences differed according to how many bad experiences they had had. Those who experienced a small to moderate number of ill effects of drinking did not consider the experiences to be not so bad and did not think that they were any more likely to experience them again compared with students who hadn't experienced them.

The researchers call this cognitive-dissonance reasoning. It leads to people, on the morning after a night of heavy partying, telling themselves "I'll never drink that much again" or "I threw up that one time, but that's not me; I won't do it again." Or, it may be that once a bad consequence of drinking happens, people think that it wasn't really as bad as they initially thought, the researchers speculated.

But the participants reporting the most bad experiences rated the

episodes as more negative and more likely to happen again. "Until high levels of negative consequences are experienced, participants aren't deterred by the ill effects of drinking," Logan said.

The findings have implications for alcohol intervention programs for college students, which tend to focus on how to avoid the negative consequences of drinking. "We should take into account how people don't think of [negative consequences](#) as all that bad or likely to happen again," Logan said, adding that factoring in how people view alcohol's positive effects "might have a bigger impact" on drinking habits.

She suggests a risk reduction approach by helping people reduce their drinking such that they still get some of the positive effects while avoiding many of the negative and recommends training exercises to increase social skills in the absence of alcohol.

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism funded the study. Co-authors are Teague Henry, a UW psychology undergraduate student; Matthew Vaughn, a former UW psychology undergraduate student; and Jeremy Luk, a UW psychology graduate student.

Provided by University of Washington

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