

# Body language can predict outcomes for recovering alcoholics

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To predict whether a problem drinker will hit the bottle again, ignore what they say and watch their body language for displays of shame, a University of British Columbia study finds.

The study, which explored drinking and [health outcomes](#) in newly sober [recovering alcoholics](#), is the first to show that physical manifestations of shame – from slumped shoulders to narrow chests – can directly predict a [relapse](#) in people who struggle with substances.

"Our study finds that how much shame people display can strongly predict not only whether they will go on to relapse, but how bad that relapse will be – that is, how many drinks they will consume," says UBC Psychology Prof. Jessica Tracy, who conducted the study with graduate student Daniel Randles.

Published today by the Association for Psychological Science journal *Clinical [Psychological Science](#)*, the study assessed the [body language](#) and self-reported shame of 46 participants in videotaped interviews, several months apart.

The study included two sessions. In the first session, participants were asked to "describe the last time you drank and felt badly about it." In a second session, four months later, participants were asked to report their drinking behaviors. They completed questionnaires about their physical and mental health at both of the sessions.

The study found that participants who displayed greater levels of shame behaviours in the first session were more likely to relapse by the second session. In contrast, written or verbal expressions of shame did not predict their likelihood of relapse.

The study found that shame behaviors in the initial session also predicted an increased number of [psychiatric symptoms](#) at the second session, and worsening health over time.

## Background

The findings have important implications for people struggling with addictions, their friends and families, and researchers and clinicians who study emotion and addiction, the researchers say.

The research is also important in light of the fact that some policymakers and judges have argued for the use of public shaming as a punitive measure, or treatment, against crime.

"Our research suggests that shaming people for difficult-to-curb behaviors may be exactly the wrong approach to take," Tracy and Randles argue. "Rather than prevent future occurrences of such behaviors, shaming may lead to an increase in these behaviors."

Provided by University of British Columbia

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