

College students who drink to reduce anxiety may face special dangers

February 7 2013, by Pat Donovan

(Medical Xpress)—A study conducted in the University at Buffalo Department of Psychology has found that college students who drink to cope with anxiety may experience more negative alcohol-related consequences than peers who drink for other reasons.

Undergraduate Research Assistant Justin Kimber used data from a larger study by Jennifer Read, PhD, UB professor of psychology. That study was funded by the National Institute on [Alcohol Abuse](#) and Alcoholism (NIDA). Guided by Read, Kimber examined the pathway between Generalized [Anxiety](#) Disorder (GAD) and drinking-to-cope behavior among [college students](#) relative to the number of negative alcohol-related consequences they reported. Such consequences include blacking out, lower grades, missing class, etc.

Kimber says, "I considered two things: the fact that self-medication theory suggests that one reason highly anxious people may drink is to cope with their symptoms, and that previous research showing that highly anxious college students tend to report more negative alcohol-related consequences.

"My hypothesis was that the reason high-anxiety students experience more negative alcohol-related consequences than other students," he says, "is that they tend to self-medicate with alcohol to cope with uncomfortable GAD symptoms like chronic worrying, [trouble sleeping](#), nervousness, stress and tension.

"The study is important," Kimber says, "because GAD affects 1-to-2 percent of college students in the U.S or somewhere between 207,000 and 415,000 college students who currently suffer from symptoms of [generalized anxiety disorder](#)." (Figures extrapolated from 2010 U.S. Census projections of 2012 [college enrollment](#) at www.census.gov/prod/2011pubs/12statab/educ.pdf.)

"I am interested in the relationship between anxiety symptoms and self-medication with alcohol because the research literature to date has shown mixed findings," he says.

"Some studies found anxiety to be a risk factor for self-medication. Others found anxiety to be a protective factor. That happens when anxiety prevents people from attending situations where alcohol may be present, thereby putting them at lower risk for possibly experiencing alcohol-related consequences."

Kimber says another issue he wanted to explore is the effect of the definition of "negative alcohol outcomes" in related studies of college students.

"Previous studies with college students usually define 'negative consequences' as long-term outcomes like alcoholism and liver cirrhosis," Kimber says, "but since these outcomes are unlikely to affect many students while they are in college, this study defined negative consequences in terms more common and immediate to this population – things like missing classes, academic failure, blacking out or sexual and relationship issues."

Kimber's study involved 72 college-student subjects with a mean age of 19 years, 4 months. Of these, 54 percent were freshman and 41.5 percent were female.

He says, "We retested the anxiety/drinking-to-cope/problematic drinking pathway using a measure of problem drinking developed with and for college student drinkers: the 48-item Young Adult Alcohol Consequences Questionnaire, which measures alcohol-related consequences experienced by an individual over the past 30 days of drinking.

"Subjects also completed the General Anxiety Disorder 7 scale, a self-reported questionnaire used to screen and measure the severity of general anxiety disorder," he says, "and Cooper's Drinking Motives Questionnaire/Drinking to Cope Subscale (DMQ-Cope), which assesses drinking motivated by an attempt to cope with distress or negative mood.

"The study found that high levels of general anxiety significantly predicted both drinking-to-cope behavior and negative alcohol consequences," Kimber says, "but that drinking-to-cope behavior does not fully mediate the relationship between general [anxiety symptoms](#) and alcohol consequences, suggesting that other factors also contribute to problem drinking patterns among those with high levels of anxiety."

Kimber says that findings from this work have implications for cognitive behavioral assessment of and therapy for college students.

"If clinicians recognize the relationship between levels of anxiety and self-medication with [alcohol](#) among college students," he says, "and if they look for negative symptoms of self-medication specific to college students, they can help their patients (or clients) recognize, understand and deal with their symptoms effectively without resorting to drinking."

Provided by University at Buffalo

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