

Study finds troubling relationship between drinking and PTSD symptoms in college students

January 14 2014, by Pat Donovan



(Medical Xpress)—The estimated 9 percent of college students who have symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) are likely to drink more alcohol than peers without the psychological condition. In turn, heavy alcohol consumption exacerbates their PTSD symptoms over time, prolonging a vicious cycle.

These are the conclusions of the first empirical study to examine the bidirectional influences of the two phenomena, influences that had been

theorized but never tested.

The study, "Reciprocal Associations Between PTSD Symptoms and Alcohol Involvement in College: A Three-Year Trait-State-Error Analysis," was funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse and is published in the most recent edition of the *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* (Vol. 22/4).

"College is a time of important developmental changes and a period of risk for heavy drinking, trauma exposure and post-traumatic stress symptoms," says Jennifer P. Read, PhD, associate professor of psychology at the University at Buffalo and principle investigator on the study.

"Heavy drinking is common on college campuses and related to risk for sexual assault, interpersonal violence and serious injury, any of which may trigger PTSD," says Read, who noted that although there has been an assumption that the two are mechanistically associated in the college population, until now, the nature of their relationship was unclear.

The study examined the relationships between PTSD and heavy drinking in 486 students as they transitioned into college and at 11 additional points over the following three years.

"We show that [alcohol](#) use and associated problems are linked over time to an exacerbation in PTSD symptoms, and that PTSD [symptoms](#) show a similar effect on [alcohol consumption](#). Each affects the other. As such, both PTSD and heavy drinking are risk factors for one another, each with implications for the other over the course of college," Read says.

"This information is useful and perhaps imperative for those who assist students dealing with these problems."

The study employed the trait-state-error modeling analytic approach, which allowed the examination of prospective and reciprocal associations among these constructs while accounting for intra-individual stability.

Co-authors on the study, both in the UB Department of Psychology, are Jeffery D. Wardell, doctoral candidate in clinical psychology, and Craig R. Colder, PhD, professor of clinical psychology.

Read's research focuses on the etiology of and interventions for problematic alcohol and other substance use in young adults. Her prior research has examined both environmental and individual determinants of alcohol use, in particular, how individual-level factors such as gender, affective state and alcohol cognitions (e.g., expectancies, motives) may account for different responses to the social environment.

In a 2011 study of 3,000 [college students](#), published in the journal *Psychological Trauma*, she found that about 9 percent met the criteria for PTSD, with the disorder found to be most common among those exposed to sexual and physical assault, most of whom were women.

A 2012 study by Read and colleagues found that the transition into college is marked by an escalation in [heavy drinking](#), drug use and use-related negative consequences, and suggested interventions that may help to ameliorate problem substance use and ultimately facilitate a stronger transition into college and beyond.

More information: "Reciprocal associations between PTSD symptoms and alcohol involvement in college: A three-year trait-state-error analysis." Read JP, Wardell JD, Colder CR. *J Abnorm Psychol*. 2013 Nov;122(4):984-97. [DOI: 10.1037/a0034918](https://doi.org/10.1037/a0034918).

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