

## Adults at higher risk of suicide attempt if parent abused alcohol, research finds

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People who grew up with a parent who abused alcohol may be 85 percent more likely to attempt suicide than people whose parents did not abuse alcohol, according to research published by the American Psychological Association.

Furthermore, having divorced parents increased by 14 percent the risk that a person would try to take his or her own life when compared to people whose parents did not divorce, the study found. But putting those two factors together - parents who abuse [alcohol](#) and are divorced—did not increase suicide attempts, according to the study, coming out in the May issue of APA's *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*.

"These findings underscore the need for comprehensive client and family assessments by clinicians to identify people in particular need of early interventions," said lead author Dana Alonzo, PhD, of Columbia University. "Individuals whose parents were divorced or abused alcohol might be more vulnerable for suicide than those from intact or nonalcoholic households. Prevention and treatment efforts need to target groups that are accurately identified as at risk."

Researchers examined data from a 2001-2002 Department of Health and Human Services survey of 43,093 people 18 years old or older who were interviewed in person. A total of 13,753 participants reported they had suffered major depression at some point in their life and of those, 1,073 said they had attempted suicide. In the group that reported attempted suicide, 25 percent said they had parents who divorced and 46 percent

said one or both parents abused alcohol. From the full sample, 2.4 percent reported a [suicide attempt](#), 16 percent reported their parents were divorced and 21 percent said at least one parent had abused alcohol.

As for why homes disrupted by a combination of divorce and drinking didn't lead to more risk of attempted suicides, the authors speculated that divorce may have decreased hostility at home and therefore didn't contribute to a child's becoming a maladjusted adult. "Or, it may be that children with an alcoholic parent are not as surprised when their parents split up because they have already witnessed so much conflict, so it may not lead to as much confusion and resentment as it might in a better-functioning family," Alonzo said.

The researchers assessed participants' history of depression by asking if they ever felt sad over a period lasting at least two weeks; had they stopped caring about things important to them; or did they no longer enjoy their favorite things. Other questions were based on the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual for Mental Disorders (DSM) criteria for depression. To determine if a participant's parent had abused alcohol, researchers read definitions from the DSM criteria for alcohol abuse, including readily observable behaviors, and asked participants if they had witnessed those behaviors by their mother or father.

The study was the first with a nationally representative sample to examine whether having divorced [parents](#) or a parent who abused alcohol affects the likelihood of [suicide](#) attempts, according to the authors.

The full sample was 48 percent male, 71 percent white, 11 percent black, 2 percent Native American, 4 percent Asian-American and 12 percent Hispanic. In terms of age, 22 percent were 18 to 29, 31 percent were 30 to 44, 31 percent were 45 to 64 and 16 percent were 65 or older.

People married or living with someone accounted for 62 percent, 17 percent were widowed, separated or divorced and 21 percent were never married. Regarding education, 16 percent had not graduated from high school, 29 percent had a high school degree and 55 percent had attended some college.

**More information:** "The Influence of Parental Divorce and Alcohol Abuse on Adult Offspring Risk of Lifetime Suicide Attempt in the United States," Dana Alonzo, PhD, and G. Thompson, PhD, Columbia University; Malka Stohl, MS, New York State Psychiatric Institute; Deborah Hasin, PhD, Columbia University and New York State Psychiatric Institute, *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, May 2014.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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