

Reversing the effects of binge drinking on mental health

October 6 2014, by Dan Gaffney

Alcohol binge drinking is bad at any age. But binge drinking if you're young and have a mental health issue is a recipe for disaster.

The good news is that intervening early with appropriate treatments can reverse the harmful effects of excessive [drinking](#) on developing brains and minds, according to new research led by the University of Sydney's Brain and Mind Research Institute.

"Alcohol is the elephant in the room when it comes to young people with [mental health](#) issues," says the BMRI's Dr Daniel Hermens.

"Binge drinking worsens mental health symptoms and causes a range of chemical and structural impacts on developing brains that affect memory and decision-making that are similar to the effects that occur older, life-long binge drinkers."

The prevalence of [binge drinking](#) among young people aged 12 to 17 years is between two and three per cent but four times that level among similar aged young people with bipolar and other mood disorders.

According to Dr Hermens, young people with [mental health problems](#) who drink to get drunk several times per week risk structural and neurochemical changes to the brain's hippocampus, which is responsible for working and long term memory. It also causes discernable effects in the forebrain, which is vital for executive decision-making.

"These alcohol-related effects compound mental health issues and make it harder to concentrate, focus, and learn new tasks at a life stage when the brain is experiencing its most dynamic period of change within the human lifespan," says Dr Hermens.

"Young people who drink heavily are more likely to make risk, dangerous choices at a time when they're learning new life skills, including sexual experimentation, driving and finding their way into the workforce. That's a volatile cocktail."

Twenty two year old Rachael Laidler began heavy drinking at the age of 19 as a way to cope with [mood swings](#) she experienced as a result of bipolar disorder. "Drinking heavily was a distraction from the intense highs and lows I felt," says Rachael.

"It's also true that [heavy drinking](#) was just the done thing among all the people I knew and partied with at the time. I didn't realise I had a drinking problem - I thought that meant drinking at home alone, and I never did that."

Today, Rachael has her life back on track thanks to confronting her drinking and seeking expert help through services at Headspace and U Space, a specialist inpatient service for young adults with mental [health issues](#) based at St Vincent's Private Hospital in Sydney.

Rachael hasn't drunk alcohol for 11 months and now has a range of healthy coping skills and support networks to call when she feels depressed or overly anxious.

"Now the bad days feel tiny compared to the massive mood swings I felt when I was self medicating with alcohol," says Rachael, who is studying business administration and volunteering with the NSW Consumer Advisory Group on Mental Health. "I'm proud of myself, and I'm proud

of what I am going to achieve in the future."

Rachael's psychiatrist, Dr Elizabeth Scott of the University of Sydney, says Rachael's experience is "all too common" among young people with mental illnesses.

"Regrettably, using alcohol and other drugs to diminish feelings like anxiety, sadness and depression is all too common among people with [mental health issues](#)," says Dr Scott, who is also Director of U Space at St Vincent's Private Hospital.

"Once a person become reliant on alcohol or other drugs to feel less anxious or depressed, it adds another layer of complexity, and lessens their capacity for recovery.

One of the greatest challenges facing young people with mental illness is the lack of adequate and accessible services, especially in remote and rural areas, according to Dr Scott.

"Few services are equipped to meet the needs of young people facing the twin challenges of mental illness and alcohol and drug dependency.

"If a young person had cancer, or serious trauma or a major infectious disease, they could expect to receive care from an expert team. That's not the case with [mental illness](#) and poly drug use.

"Yet the scale of this problem is like an iceberg - it's massive but largely unseen."

Meanwhile, where can [young people](#) seek help? "If you're a young person and think you have a mental health issue, or you have a problem with drug and alcohol use - talk to your friends, see your GP, get on the web and find a Headspace service - there are about 90 of these around

the country."

Provided by University of Sydney

Citation: Reversing the effects of binge drinking on mental health (2014, October 6) retrieved 7 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2014-10-reversing-effects-binge-mental-health.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.