

Marriage can lead to dramatic reduction in heavy drinking in young adults

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Research on alcohol-use disorders consistently shows problem drinking decreases as we age. Also called, "maturing out," these changes generally begin during young adulthood and are partially caused by the roles we take on as we become adults. Now, researchers collaborating between the University of Missouri and Arizona State University have found evidence that marriage can cause dramatic drinking reductions even among people with severe drinking problems. Scientists believe findings could help improve clinical efforts to help these people, inform public health policy changes and lead to more targeted interventions for young adult problem drinkers.

"A key conceptual framework psychologists use to explain maturing out and the 'marriage effect' is role-incompatibility theory," said Dr. Matthew Lee, a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Psychological Sciences in the College of Arts and Science at MU. "The theory suggests that if a person's existing behavioral pattern is conflicting with the demands of a new role, such as marriage, one way to resolve the incompatibility is to change behavior. We hypothesized that this incompatibility may be greater for more severe drinkers, so they'll need to make greater changes to their drinking to meet the role demands of marriage."

The researchers used previously collected data from a long-term, ongoing study of familial alcohol disorders led by Laurie Chassin, Regents Professor of Psychology in the Department of Psychology at Arizona State University. They examined how the drinking rates of the

participants changed as they aged from age 18 to 40, and how this change was affected by whether or not participants became married. About 50 percent of the participants included in the study of familial alcoholism were children of alcoholics.

"Confirming our prediction, we found that marriage not only led to reductions in heavy drinking in general, this effect was much stronger for those who were severe problem drinkers before getting married," Lee said. "This seems consistent with role incompatibility theory. We believe that greater problem drinking likely conflicts more with the demands of roles like marriage; thus, more severe problem drinkers are likely required to more substantially alter their drinking habits to adapt to the marital role."

The researchers suggest further studies are needed to better understanding how these role-driven drinking reductions occur. They believe this could uncover key insights into the nature of clinically significant forms of problem [drinking](#) and inform public policy and clinical efforts to help severe problem drinkers.

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