

Study highlights how former problem drinkers navigate social drinking situations

September 22 2015, by Matt Shipman



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A small, qualitative study published in the journal *Health Communication* highlights a wide variety of approaches that former problem drinkers take to determine how and whether to tell people in social situations that they don't drink.

"The findings tell us that former problem drinkers can find it tricky to navigate [social situations](#) where alcohol is involved, and makes clear it's important to support those who aren't drinking and not push non-drinkers to disclose their reasons for not having a drink," says Lynsey Romo, lead author of a paper on the work and an assistant professor of communication at North Carolina State University.

For the study, researchers interviewed 11 former problem drinkers, who had been sober for between one and 19 years. The work was part of a larger study on how all non-drinkers - not just recovering problem drinkers - navigate social events where alcohol is being served.

"We found that former problem drinkers still want to be social, of course, but that they had to find ways to determine whether to disclose their non-drinking status to others," Romo says. "Study participants said they felt the need to weigh how much they should tell other people. Essentially, they assessed the risk of being socially stigmatized if they were open about not drinking or about being in recovery."

Many [study participants](#) reported trying to avoid the issue altogether, either by "passing" as a drinker (holding a cup but not drinking) or by simply turning down offers a drink without saying why.

If asked directly, some would make excuses for not drinking - citing health problems or being on medication that didn't allow them to drink alcohol. Some would try to use humor to change the subject.

However, most participants noted that they make a point to stress that it was okay for others to drink around them.

A few study participants - particularly those who had been sober for a longer period of time - reported being open about their history of problem drinking, particularly if they thought it would defuse a situation

that threatened their sobriety or if they thought it would help others that may be struggling with problem [drinking](#).

The paper, "'Coming out' as an alcoholic: how former problem drinkers negotiate disclosure of their nondrinking identity," was published in *Health Communication* Sept. 11.

More information: *Health Communication*,
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