

Daily stress can trigger uptick in illegal drug use for those on parole, probation

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A recent study finds that even small, day-to-day stressors can cause an increase in illegal drug use among people on probation or parole who have a history of substance use. The study could inform future treatment efforts and was conducted by researchers at North Carolina State University, the University of Texas, the Schroeder Institute for Tobacco and Policy Studies, the Truth Initiative, Gateway Foundation Corrections

and Texas Christian University.

"Our findings suggest that drug and alcohol [treatment](#) are valuable tools for those on parole or probation, and that even if people relapse, the treatment helps them limit their substance use over time," says Sarah Desmarais, an associate professor of psychology at NC State and co-lead author of a paper describing the work.

"The work also tells us that substance abuse prevention programs may be more effective if they take into account the treatment [history](#) of program participants," says Shevaun Neupert, an associate professor of psychology at NC State and co-lead author of a paper describing the work.

"Typically, we focus on the stress of traumatic events, such as the death of a loved one, and its effect on people returning to substance use," Desmarais says. "For this study, we wanted to know how small, daily stressors—like arguments—might affect alcohol or illegal drug use."

"This work may help us inform treatment and help people avoid substance-use problems that could lead them back to prison," Neupert says.

For the study, researchers looked at data on 117 men who were on probation or parole and were enrolled in a community-based [substance abuse treatment](#) program. All of the study participants completed a baseline psychosocial evaluation that addressed their criminal history, their history of substance use and their treatment history. Participants then completed a confidential, daily survey about their day-to-day stressors, cravings for alcohol and illegal drugs, and use of alcohol and illegal drugs for 14 consecutive days.

"We found that the more stress people had on any given day, the more

likely they were to crave and use [illegal drugs](#) that day," Neupert says. "And this effect was especially pronounced in study participants who had little or no previous history with drug-treatment programs."

The researchers found no connection between daily stress and alcohol use. However, they did find that stressful days affected cravings for alcohol on the following day - but in two different ways. Participants with a lengthy history of treatment actually experienced less intense [alcohol](#) cravings the day after stress, whereas participants with little history of treatment saw an increase in cravings.

"Taken together, these findings indicate that treatment may have a strong, residual effect that buffers the impact of stress on substance cravings and abuse," Desmarais says.

The researchers also looked at whether illegal drug use predicted stress the following day, and it did - particularly for those with an extensive history of drug treatment.

"We think this particular finding indicates that these [study participants](#) have a more severe problem with drug abuse, and possibly that they are especially aware of the consequences of their [drug](#) use," Neupert says.

More information: Shevaun D. Neupert et al, Daily Stressors as Antecedents, Correlates, and Consequences of Alcohol and Drug Use and Cravings in Community-Based Offenders., *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors* (2017). [DOI: 10.1037/adb0000276](https://doi.org/10.1037/adb0000276)

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