

Drinking to cope with stress may increase risk of alcohol problems

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Penn State researchers in the College of Health and Human Development studied the relationship between stress and drinking. Credit: Patrick Mansell

It can be tempting for some to reach for a cold beer after a stressful day,

but drinking alcohol to relieve stress could potentially lead to drinking problems down the road, according to Penn State researchers.

In a study, students reported their [drinking](#) habits along with how much [stress](#) they were experiencing. The researchers found that the more students drank to cope with stress—as opposed to drinking for fun or to celebrate—the higher their risk for having [problems](#) with alcohol.

"For some people, when they got stressed out, their likelihood of drinking shot way up. For others, it was less of an increase or it may not have mattered at all," said Michael Russell, assistant professor of biobehavioral health. "Once we were able to figure out which people had the highest increase in their drinking, we were able to see whether those people are at greater risk for harmful drinking at the end of [college](#)."

Previous research estimated that 32 percent of college students engage in "heavy" drinking, characterized as having five or more drinks on a single occasion within the past two weeks. This type of drinking tends to be associated with physical and sexual assaults, alcohol-related traffic deaths and problems with alcohol abuse.

Jennifer Maggs, professor of human development and family studies, said that college students drink for a variety of reasons: to have fun, celebrate or relieve stress. She said that while parties on college campuses are often recognized as being associated with dangerous drinking, the researchers were curious about how stress affects alcohol consumption.

"We wanted to specifically focus on whether students who drink more on days they experience stressful events—or stressors—were at greater risk for ongoing problems with alcohol than those whose drinking was not contingent on stressful events," Maggs said.

In the study, 744 first-year [college students](#) spent two weeks of each semester through their senior year filling out daily, web-based diary entries about stress and drinking. They answered questions about whether they had experienced any stressors that day, what caused the stress, if they drank that day and how many drinks they had.

"In the fourth year, students were also screened for alcohol problems by using something called AUDIT: the Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test," Russell said. "The students were asked questions about potentially problematic behaviors like not being able to stop drinking once they start or if they often black out while drinking."

The researchers found that with each additional stressor, the odds of a [student](#) drinking that day went up 8 percent, while how much they drank went up 4 percent. On days that students drank but reported no stressors, the typical student had 4.8 drinks, but on days they drank and reported six stressors, the typical student had 5.9 drinks. On average, 15.7 percent of diary entries were marked as drinking days, and those days also tended to meet the criteria for "heavy" drinking.

In the fourth year, the researchers found that students whose odds of drinking went up the most on high- versus low-stressor days also had the most problems with alcohol. In total, 54 students—8.9 percent—showed a high risk for [alcohol](#) problems in their fourth year.

"The people who showed more stress-related drinking—whose drinking really spikes when they're stressed—they were more likely to develop harmful drinking behavior at the end of college," Russell said. "Our results are preliminary, but I think it's an important message. Increasing your drinking when you're stressed could have long-term consequences; it could possibly put you on the path toward a drinking problem."

Maggs said the results—published in the journal *Psychology of Addictive*

Behaviors—could give further insight into how to prevent dangerous drinking on college campuses, and that further research on the subject is needed.

"Although celebratory, large-scale drinking events on or near college campuses are essential targets for prevention and harm reduction, campuses interested in health promotion should also be concerned with students who may drink as a strategy for coping with challenges," Maggs said. "Future research examining this process with daily or more frequently collected data in adults of all ages is needed to replicate our findings and to examine what types of stressful experiences increase drinking."

Provided by Pennsylvania State University

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