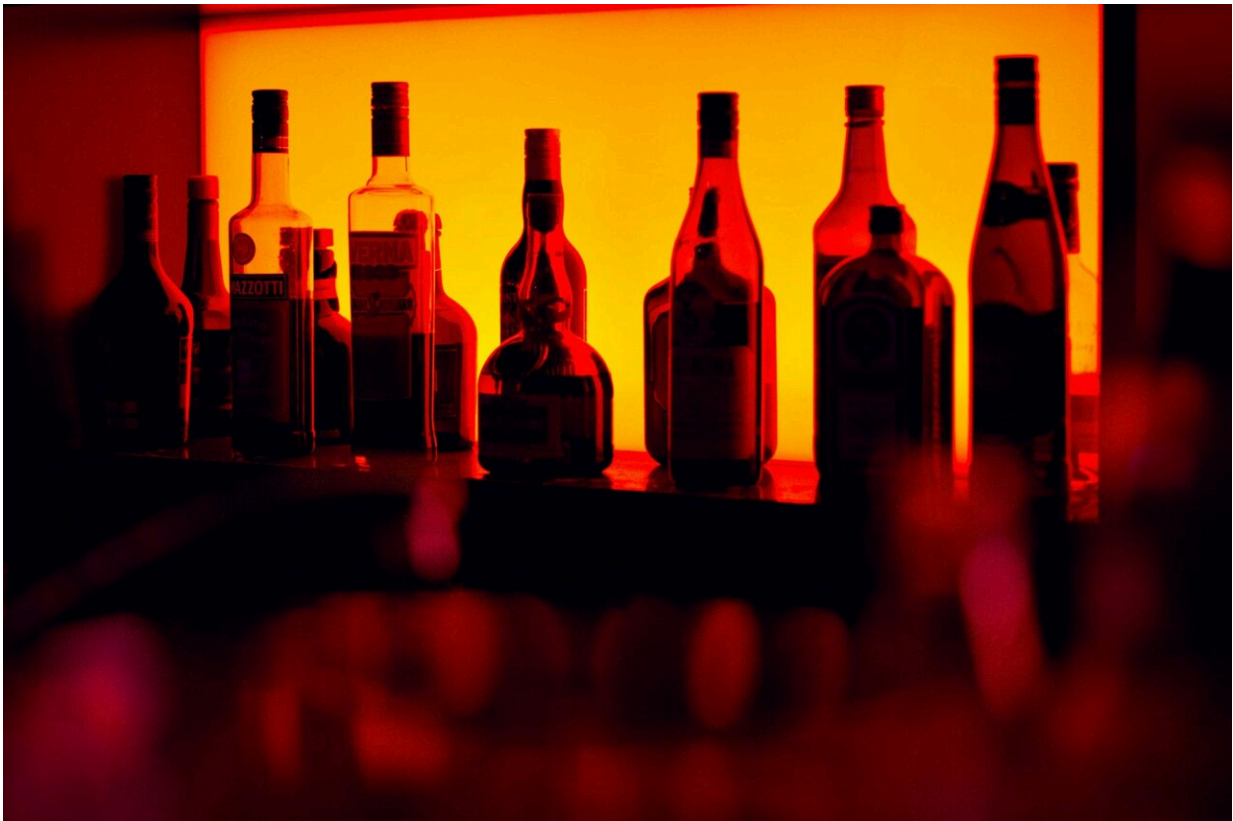


Feeling more empathy linked to greater alcohol consumption

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People who reported feeling more affective empathy on a given day than was typical for them were likely to drink more than usual, according to a study published in *Alcohol: Clinical and Experimental Research*. Notably,

these daily shifts in affective empathy levels were associated with the number of drinks consumed even after controlling for daily shifts in positive and negative emotions.

This means that the association between affective [empathy](#) and [alcohol](#) use was not explained by shifts in [emotional states](#). Overall, the findings indicate that changes in an individual's affective empathy on a day-to-day basis may be important to understand alcohol use.

Researchers sought to explore how two facets of empathy may motivate an individual's drinking. Specifically, researchers examined affective empathy, referring to the ability to share another person's [emotional state](#), and cognitive empathy, referring to the ability to understand another person's perspective or emotional state.

In contrast to past research, which has almost exclusively focused on trait empathy (a person's general tendency to show empathy across situations), this study focused on state empathy, the variability in an individual's empathy in response to their interpersonal interactions on a daily basis.

For the study, researchers asked just under five hundred adult alcohol drinkers to respond to questions on their smartphones at different times throughout the day to measure their affective and cognitive empathy in response to specific social interactions and how much positive (e.g., relaxed, happy) and negative (e.g., nervous, sad) emotions they were experiencing. Participants were also asked about the amount of alcohol they consumed that day.

The study found that individuals consumed more drinks on days when they reported greater than average state affective empathy levels. Additionally, participants with higher trait positive affect were less likely to drink alcohol on a given day.

However, as day-level state positive affect increased, individuals were more likely to drink alcohol and drink more, whereas negative affect did not influence alcohol use. Notably, no significant associations were evident between day-level state cognitive empathy and alcohol use, suggesting that affective empathy may be more important in explaining alcohol use.

These findings on state affective empathy contrast with previous studies, which have found that lower trait empathy is associated with greater alcohol use and problems. The researchers speculated that the discrepant findings might be due to differences in how empathy was assessed.

Specifically, participants in this study reported on their empathy levels in real-time and about specific social interactions rather than filling out questionnaires about their typical (that is, trait) empathy, as done in prior studies. The researchers suggested that future research is needed to confirm this, though.

The study authors also noted the racially homogenous sample group and a brief protocol duration as limitations of the study, and they recommended that further research explores mechanisms and individual difference factors that may influence the link between higher state affective empathy and increased alcohol use.

More information: Lakshmi Kumar et al, Associations of state and trait empathy with daily alcohol use, *Alcohol: Clinical and Experimental Research* (2023). [DOI: 10.1111/acer.15056](https://doi.org/10.1111/acer.15056)

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