

If you have a mind to drink less, mindfulness can help

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Mindfulness is having a moment, but is it worth all the hype? Researchers at CU's Center for Health and Neuroscience, Genes, and Environment (CUChange) say the answer is yes—particularly when it comes to drinking behavior.

A team including Carillon Skrzynski, a faculty research associate at

CUChange, [has published research](#) building on the growing body of evidence suggesting mindfulness plays a significant role in influencing [alcohol use](#).

Their research, published in *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, found that mindfulness techniques, including intentional awareness of what's happening and non-judgmental acceptance of whatever that may be, helped reduce cravings for alcohol.

Alcohol: A growing problem

For many, alcohol is a normal part of life. At the same time, the number of deaths in which alcohol is a significant contributing factor has risen sharply in recent years. Between 2020 and 2021, the number of alcohol-related deaths in the United States increased by 29%, as compared to data from 2016–17, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Data also show that one in six Americans binge drinks, with a quarter doing so every week.

If alcohol is so bad for our health, why is it so hard to stop drinking to excess, and what can we do to make it easier to cut down or stop? Skrzynski has been fascinated by these questions since her undergraduate days as a psychology major at the University of Michigan.

While studying substance abuse in her introduction to psychology class, Skrzynski was struck by both the prevalence of substance abuse disorders and their far-reaching negative effects. "I remember being extremely curious about why people are engaging in [substance abuse](#) when it's obviously disrupting their lives in really deleterious ways," she says.

"When I found out psychology researchers were exploring this question in systematic ways to try to help people with addiction issues, I

remember thinking, 'That's really cool. I want to be part of that process.'"

After graduating from the University of Michigan, she earned her Ph.D. in psychology at Carnegie Mellon University before arriving at CU Boulder to continue her quest to pinpoint the variables that contribute to the development and maintenance of addictive behavior.

The power of mindfulness

Skrzynski's team's recent research suggests mindfulness may be a simple but powerful way to cultivate a healthier relationship with alcohol. Led by Kent Hutchison, one of the founding directors of CUChange and professor of psychiatry at CU Anschutz, the researchers designed a study to compare the effectiveness of mindfulness-based relapse prevention versus standard relapse prevention, in which they randomly assigned nearly 200 participants to one of the two groups.

The results suggest that mindfulness helped participants decrease their drinking. While participants in both groups experienced an initial reduction in the number of days they engaged in [heavy drinking](#), at the 20-week and 32-week follow-ups, the improvements remained stable for the mindfulness group but diminished for the standard treatment group.

Their research also suggested even slight increases in mindfulness had the potential to reduce alcohol cravings.

"The takeaway here is that mindfulness can be a really useful tool in reducing drinking, or maybe even quitting entirely," says Skrzynski. And while this idea isn't necessarily groundbreaking, it's nonetheless important.

"Most researchers would agree that mindfulness does have great utility in this endeavor," she says. "But the more supporting evidence you have,

the stronger the case."

How to be more mindful

Mindfulness consists of two essential components, says Skrzynski. "One, being intentionally aware of what's happening, and, two, non-judgmental acceptance of whatever that may be." To bring more mindfulness into your day, you can try a couple of the techniques the researchers taught the mindfulness group.

The first is body scanning, which, as the name implies, involves slowly and sequentially checking in with each part of your body, from your head to your toes and noticing how it feels.

The second, urge surfing, means noticing when you have a craving (in this case, for alcohol), and instead of having a drink, allowing yourself to experience the craving, knowing that at some point the strength of the urge will peak, at which point it will begin to decline.

"Both techniques involve awareness and acceptance of whatever is happening that you're not trying to push it away," says Skrzynski, adding that it's a powerful tool no matter what you're dealing with. "Although my research focuses on addiction, the truth is, [mindfulness](#) can be transformative in so many life domains."

More information: Carillon J. Skrzynski et al, Mindfulness mechanisms in alcohol use: Comparing top-down and bottom-up processes., *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors* (2023). [DOI: 10.1037/adb0000932](https://doi.org/10.1037/adb0000932)

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