

'Drink less' campaigns should focus on why and how

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Campaigns to get young people to drink less should focus on the benefits of not drinking and how it can be achieved, a new study suggests.

Pointing out the advantages and achievability of staying sober is more effective than traditional approaches that warn of the risks of [heavy drinking](#), according to the research carried out at the University of Sussex by researcher Dr Dominic Conroy.

The study, published this week in the *British Journal of Health Psychology*, found that university students were more likely to reduce

their overall [drinking](#) levels if they focused on the benefits of abstaining, such as more money and better health.

They were also less likely to binge drink if they had imagined strategies for how non-drinking might be achieved - for example, being direct but polite when declining a drink, or choosing to spend time with supportive friends.

Typical promotions around healthy drinking focus on the risks of high alcohol consumption and encourage people to monitor their [drinking behaviour](#) (e.g. by keeping a drinks diary). However, the current study found that completing a drinks diary was less effective in encouraging safer drinking behaviour than completing an exercise relating to non-drinking.

Dr Conroy says: "We focused on students because, in the UK, they remain a group who drink heavily relative to their non-student peers of the same age. Similarly, attitudes about the acceptability of heavy drinking are relatively lenient among students.

"Recent campaigns, such as the NHS Change4Life initiative, give good online guidance as to how many units you should be drinking and how many units are in specific drinks.

"Our research contributes to existing health promotion advice, which seeks to encourage [young people](#) to consider taking 'dry days' yet does not always indicate the range of benefits nor suggest how non-drinking can be more successfully 'managed' in social situations."

Dr Conroy studied 211 English [university students](#) aged 18-25 over the course of a month. Participants in the study completed one of four exercises involving either: imagining positive outcomes of non-drinking during a social occasion; imagining strategies required to successfully

not drink during a social occasion; imagining both positive outcomes and required strategies; or completing a drinks diary task.

At the start of the study, participants in the outcome group were asked to list positive outcomes of not drinking and those in the process group listed what strategies they might use to reduce their drinking. Those in the combined group did both.

They were reminded of their answers via email during the one month course of the study and asked to continue practising this mental simulation.

All groups completed an online survey at various points, indicating how much they had drunk the previous week.

Over the course of one month, Dr Conroy found that students who imagined positive outcomes of non-drinking reduced their weekly [alcohol consumption](#) from 20 units to 14 units on average.

Similarly, students who imagined required strategies for non-drinking reduced the frequency of binge drinking episodes - classified as six or more units in one session for women, and eight or more units for men - from 1.05 episodes a week to 0.73 episodes a week on average.

Interestingly, the research indicates that perceptions of non-drinkers were also more favourable after taking part in the study. Dr Conroy says this could not be directly linked to the intervention but was an interesting additional feature of the study. He says: "Studies have suggested that holding negative views of non-drinkers may be closely linked to personal drinking behaviour and we were interested to see in the current study that these views may have improved as a result of taking part in a non-drinking exercise.

"I think this shows that health campaigns need to be targeted and easy to fit into daily life but also help support people to accomplish changes in behaviour that might sometimes involve 'going against the grain', such as periodically not drinking even when in the company of other people who are drinking."

More information: 'Efficacy of a non-drinking mental simulation intervention for reducing student alcohol consumption' *British Journal of Health Psychology*, [onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10 ... /bjhp.12133/abstract](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/bjhp.12133/abstract)

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