

Study: Perceived risk, personalities sway drinking habits

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Undergraduate students who believe they have less control over post-drinking agonies such as hangovers and vomiting are more likely to over-drink than students who are able to resist martinis once they're already tipsy, according to psychologists at UW-Madison.

Students with borderline or antisocial personality traits are also less likely to avoid the negative fallout of alcohol use, report the researchers in a paper that appears in the July 2004 Journal of Applied Social Psychology.

With spring marking the start of raucous semester-end college parties around the nation, the UW-Madison work may help refine existing intervention strategies aimed at curbing student alcohol use.

Public health efforts could target specific groups of students based on personality and perceptions of control, for instance, rather than issuing blanket warnings that may resonate with only a few, says Colleen Moore, a UW-Madison psychology professor and co-author of the study.

"Not many studies have looked at the relationship between risk perception, personality type and alcohol use, even though the perception of risk is a key factor in driving self-protective behavior," says Moore.

To examine risk perception levels, lead author Emily Crawford, who at the time of the research was an undergraduate psychology student and Hilldale Fellowship recipient, asked almost 300 undergraduates to rate

their personal perceived risk for succumbing to drinking-related outcomes ranging from hangovers to death. Crawford also monitored personality types among survey participants, looking for relationships between certain traits and the propensity to shrug off raging headaches that quickly follow wild party nights.

It still is unclear exactly why alcohol abuse is more prevalent in students who perceive less power to avoid the harmful consequences of over-drinking or who believe that drinking-associated discomforts aren't that severe, says Crawford.

"It is possible that particular aspects of risk perception are risk factors for heavy drinking or substance abuse," says Crawford. Also, heavy drinkers may experience painful post-drinking symptoms so routinely that they may develop a kind of "learned hopelessness" that prevents them from believing they can ever drink less, Crawford adds.

"Interventions that target these students are important, with the goal to increase the confidence and thus the motivation, to reduce drinking," says Crawford.

Source: UW-Madison

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