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New study finds binge drinking as contagious as the common cold

By *Katie McDonald*

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Romantic partners are a powerful influence. But a new study conducted by Dalhousie University researchers has revealed that dating couples may have more influence over each other than you think – especially when it comes to binge drinking.

Key Points:

- Do couples influence each other's drinking habits? Over a 28 day time frame, researchers were able to predict one partner's binge drinking based the other partner's binge drinking.
- This study offers a unique explanation for why young adults are binge drinking: Because they are involved in a drinking partnership that promotes binge drinking.
- People who are dealing with an addiction are often quick to blame themselves and to look past social relationships and wider environments as possible contributors to their addiction. This research shows your partner can influence your binge drinking—a finding that has important implications for assessment, prevention, and treatment.
- The research studied 208 nonmarried, heterosexual dating couples in their early 20's. Each couple had to be dating for at least 3 months, have face-to-face contact at least 5 days a week, and one member of each dating couple had to be a university/college student. On average, couples were dating for close to 2 years.
- The lead author in this study is Aislin Mushquash, 4th year PhD student in clinical psychology along with Dalhousie researchers Dr. Simon Sherry, assistant professor in the Department of Psychology, and Dr. Sherry Stewart, professor in the Departments of Psychiatry, Psychology, and Community Health and Epidemiology.

Pull Quotes:

- “Binge drinking in university students occurs in both young men and women. Studies with married couples show that men have more of an influence on women, but in our study, we found both young women and young men influence their partner's binge drinking” -Aislin Mushquash, 4th year PhD student in clinical psychology, Dalhousie University, Halifax, N.S.
- “We're not so naive as researchers to think students are going to walk away from binge drinking. But our study shows there's a large majority of students who form romantic

partnerships where alcohol is a regularly occurring theme.” –Dr. Simon Sherry, assistant professor in the Department of Psychology, Dalhousie University, Halifax, N.S.

- “In some respect this is a cautionary piece of research. Pick your friends and lovers carefully because they influence you more than you think.” –Dr. Simon Sherry, assistant professor in the Department of Psychology, Dalhousie University, Halifax, N.S.
- “This research answers some key question but always raises some key questions – do birds of a feather all flock together? Do heavy drinkers naturally gravitate towards each other? Does each partner have a family history of alcoholism? These are questions we don’t yet know the answers to.” –Dr. Simon Sherry, assistant professor in the Department of Psychology, Dalhousie University, Halifax, N.S.
- “Something that came up in our study was the “but everyone’s doing it” mentality. A common behaviour can still be a destructive behaviour and there’s still a subset of people who don’t give up alcohol misuse when they graduate.” –Dr. Simon Sherry, assistant professor in the Department of Psychology, Dalhousie University, Halifax, N.S.

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