

Dal News

Binge drinking - as contagious as the common cold?

Relationship partners affect each other's alcohol habits

Katie McDonald - January 9, 2012



Researchers are able to predict one partner's binge drinking habits based on the other partner's habits. (Bruce Bottomley photo)

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They say you always hurt the ones you love – but what happens when the one you love has bad habits that are hurting you?

A new study by Dalhousie researchers has revealed that dating couples significantly influence each other's drinking habits, so much so that researchers were able to predict one partner's binge drinking habits based on the other partner's binge drinking habits.

Researchers found this to be a disturbing trend.

“We’re not talking about a guy and a girl who like to enjoy a few drinks after class on Friday,” explains Simon Sherry, assistant professor in the Department of Psychology and co-author of the study. “This is not the way in which some students are drinking. These are two people who get together and alcohol is a central theme in how they spend time together and how they have fun together.”

Heavy episodic drinking, or binge drinking, is defined as having at least four drinks (women) or five drinks (men)

in two hours.

The researchers studied 208 unmarried, heterosexual dating couples in their early 20s for a 28-day period. Each couple had to be dating for at least three months, have face-to-face contact at least five days a week, and one member of each dating couple had to be a university/college student. On average, the couples who took part had been dating for two years.

Not just 'a phase'

Aislin Mushquash, lead author and PhD student in the clinical psychology program, says this research differs from any binge drinking study done before because it doesn't just look at the individual but looks at how the individual is affected by those around him or her.

"This study forces you to consider your social circle, including your romantic partner and friends, and ask questions about why you do the things you do," she says. "[It] suggests your social circle might have a greater influence on you than you realize, especially when it comes to risky drinking behaviors."

Dr. Sherry adds that while most research done on binge drinking focuses on what's going on "between the ears," this study suggests that context counts and people in close proximity can influence binge drinking behaviour.

He notes that although binge drinking is often associated with university students, the problem is that it doesn't always stop at graduation.

"We're not naive as researchers to think university students are going to walk away from drinking," he says. "But it's important to note that there's a portion of them who don't give it up once they're done university – they graduate with a degree and a diagnosis in an alcohol related problem."

Public health concern

Binge drinking in university students is an important public health issue, says Sherry Stewart, co-author and professor in the Departments of Psychiatry, Psychology, and Community Health and Epidemiology.

"Regular binge drinking in college is associated with an elevated risk for the development of alcoholism as an adult," she says. "It contributes significantly to a variety of social problems, including lost productivity, interpersonal violence, drunk driving and suicide."

Dr. Stewart, well-known for her research and expertise on addiction, says repeated binge drinking can cause physical damage to many organ systems and is associated with hypertension, pancreatitis, liver disease, and numerous other physical health problems.

Although this new study answers some key questions, it also raises others. The researchers don't yet know, for example, the degree to which binge drinkers are romantically attracted to other binge drinkers, or how family history or proximity to drinking outlets may impact the results.

That said, the results still should pose cause for concern.

“In some respect this is a cautionary piece of research,” says Dr. Sherry. “Pick your friends and lovers carefully because they influence you more than you think.”

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January 9, 2012 3:15 PM

Very interesting work.

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