

If your partner binge drinks, you might too

December 23, 2011 - 4:36am BY JOHN MCPHEE HEALTH REPORTER

If you're craving one more drink after your spouse opens another bottle, think again.

People who live together can influence each other's drinking habits, particularly when it comes to binge consumption, according to a recent study by a team of Dalhousie University researchers.

"If their partner drinks a lot, we've found that within a few weeks or a month, they're also going to drink a lot," said Aislin Mushquash, fourth-year PhD student in clinical psychology and lead author of the study, in an interview.

The researchers studied 208 non-married, heterosexual dating couples in their early 20s over a 28-day period. Each couple had to have been 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 or college student. On average, couples were dating for close to two years.

Most studied at Dalhousie, although a few were students at other Halifax universities.

Binge drinking is defined as downing at least four (women) or five (men) drinks in two hours.

While your own drinking patterns will best predict your future habits, your partner can have a small but measurable effect as well.

"It was in the range we expected," Mushquash said. "We didn't expect that partners (would) have all the influence, because you influence yourself quite a lot."

The study's conclusions underline the maxim to choose your friends — and your intimate partners — carefully, said co-author Simon Sherry, an assistant professor at Dalhousie.

"If you're serious about making a sustained change in problematic drinking behaviour, you need to consider who'll support you and who'll undermine you," he said.

"In other words, romantic relationships and wider social networks — your friends, your family and other people — are going to be quite influential in whether or not you persist or desist in a problematic pattern of drinking."

While the influence of partners wasn't a surprise, the amount of binge drinking among local university students did raise some eyebrows. About 60 per cent of the study group were classified as binge drinkers, compared to the 40 per cent range in other studies done on university-age drinkers.

A pattern of such drinking, not surprisingly, can lead to trouble, Sherry said.

"On the one hand, binge drinking is a common behaviour," he said.

"On the other hand, binge drinking is a destructive behaviour. We know when people drink a large amount of alcohol in a short period of time they're prone to difficulties at school, at work, in relationships, with accidents or unlawful behaviours."

The study didn't take into consideration the context of the participants' binge drinking, such as whether it was at a weekend party or a Wednesday afternoon in the apartment with their partner, Mushquash said. She may look into those factors in future studies as part of her doctoral work.

Whatever the situation, it's a good time of year for people to consider their drinking habits, Mushquash said.

"Over the holiday season coming, where more people are around alcohol and around celebratory experiences . . . just be aware of the influences that other people might have on them.

"And think about if their romantic partner wasn't having another drink, would they be having another drink?"

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