

The Effects of Alcohol Consumption on College Students' Lives

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Drinking alcohol is a common social activity for some college students and is considered a normal part of the classic college lifestyle. Students can experience their freedom, make mistakes, understand themselves, create connections with people, learn, and have fun. College requires hard work to maintain strong academic performance, but when the hard work is over, college allows students to unwind and have a good time with friends, which can involve alcohol. Although alcohol use in students can be used as a semi-regular social activity, for some, it can seriously affect their lives. With new freedom from parents or authorities, drinking alcohol can become an abused and regular occurrence. In some instances, students may drink excessively for social reasons or to experience relief from the stress of college.

On the other hand, drinking may be used to cope with mental health issues, such as depression and anxiety. Using alcohol as a coping mechanism can be done without knowing the detrimental effects that alcohol can have on physical and mental health. Alcohol-induced sleep can create fragmented or poor sleep due to irregular rapid-eye movement (REM) sleep (Couture 186). Alcohol consumption can allow college students to experience a release from the pressures of college life. However, students with excessive alcohol consumption habits can be affected in the present and the future.

The stereotypical college lifestyle involves friends, partying, and a considerable amount of alcohol. Despite this, not every college student spends time chugging beer and taking shots. A sample of Australian college students aged eighteen to fifty was surveyed on the frequency of their alcohol consumption; it was found that students aged eighteen to twenty drank significantly more than students over twenty (Tanudjaja et al. 262). This comes with no surprise as eighteen to twenty is the typical college age when individuals are granted more freedom from parents and are newly the legal drinking age. The younger students were more likely to drink on an almost daily basis and more likely to blackout when drinking alcohol (Tanudjaja et al. 262). Of the eighteen-to-twenty-year old's, fifty percent consumed alcohol at a higher level than the recommended amount by the Australian National Health and Medical Research Council Alcohol Guidelines for lifetime harm (Tanudjaja et al. 262). This data shows that college students consume large amounts of

alcohol regularly; however, they may be unaware of its effects or are aware but assume that those effects would never happen to them. As college students drink more alcohol than recommended for their health, they are putting themselves at risk for future health problems both physically and mentally.

Regardless of an individual's age, consistent and excessive drinking patterns greatly increase the risk of health problems. A study at the Stockholm University of Sweden measured the relationship between alcohol consumption and the risk of alcohol-related health problems. Of a sample of 37,484 individuals aged twenty-five to seventy, one percent of the participants died over the follow-up period due to an alcohol-related diagnosis, which averaged thirteen years (Thern and Landberg 803). The heavy drinkers of the study were eight times as likely to be diagnosed with an alcohol-related disease compared to light drinkers, and weekly drinkers were fourteen times as likely to be diagnosed with an alcohol-related disease compared to people who did not drink at all (Thern and Landberg 803). Health problems due to alcohol can include heart and liver diseases, increased blood pressure, digestive problems, increased risk of a stroke, a weaker immune system, and learning and memory problems (Thern and Landberg 805). High alcohol consumption can also increase the risk of developing breast, mouth, throat, esophagus, liver, colon, and rectum cancers (Thern and Landberg 805). Among the effects alcohol can have on an individual's physical health and the increased risk of developing future health problems, it can also impact the state of an individual's mental health.

Mental health is an important issue for individuals everywhere, and coping strategies vary for every individual. At Dalhousie University, students aged eighteen to twenty-five were surveyed on why they drink. The survey was done on students who displayed moderate to severe depression and stated that they drank to cope with depression. All participants reported that they felt an improvement in their mood shortly after drinking alcohol (Couture 183). Contrarily, 62.5 percent of participants noticed that their mood worsened later in the evening. 93.8 percent of participants reported drinking socially, which increased and improved their social interactions and allowed them to make more friends (Couture 183). On the other hand, alcohol is a depressant that disrupts the balance of neurotransmitters in the brain and, therefore, can affect a person's feelings, thoughts, and behaviours (Rowland 2). Although alcohol can make a person feel relaxed, have lower anxiety, and feel better mentally, the chemical changes in one's brain due to the alcohol lead to more negative feelings (Rowland 2). Individuals with mental health issues may use alcohol to self-

medicate to help deal with their emotions. Although alcohol may be used to help an individual deal with their depression, drinking alcohol may be the cause of their depression (Rowland 3). Alcohol affects the natural levels of serotonin and dopamine, which initially cause feelings of happiness. Still, as the effects of alcohol wear off, serotonin and dopamine are deficient and can make one feel worse than before (Alberta Health Services 16). Among the effects alcohol has on an individual's mental health, their mental health can be affected more by the inability to have a restorative sleep.

Depression can be correlated with insufficient or poor sleep, which causes some people to drink more and therefore enter a spiral of alcohol and mental illness. Alcohol-induced sleep can create fragmented or poor sleep due to irregular REM sleep (Couture 186). The irregularities in REM sleep may increase the chances of an individual experiencing more vivid or weird dreams and increased snoring. Over half of the participants dependent on alcohol reported that they experienced insomnia symptoms (Brooks 73). Individuals who struggle with insomnia symptoms may self-medicate with the use of alcohol. Alternatively, they may use the sedative effects of alcohol as a sleep aid to increase fatigue and have an easier time sleeping (Couture 186). Using alcohol as a sleep aid can increase an individual's tolerance towards alcohol; as this tolerance increases, individuals consume more alcohol (Brooks 74). Even after quitting regularly drinking alcohol, sleep disturbances due to alcohol consumption persist. While for some, abandoning alcohol will improve their sleep quality, the risk of lifelong insomnia remains (Brooks 79). When a student can experience quality and rejuvenating sleep, it increases energy, brain function, body functions, and memory (Brooks 79). Alcohol can greatly impact students' lives by causing physical and mental health issues. However, alcohol can also allow students to connect with others and have an enjoyable time amid college stress.

The consumption of alcohol, in the stereotypical sense, often includes that of a social setting. Social interactions are fundamental aspects of the human experience and play an essential role in the level of happiness in an individual's life. In a study investigating the effects of alcohol on emotions and bonding, the results found a positive correlation with the groups that did consume alcohol (Sayette 1). The participants in this study consumed one drink of alcohol over a thirty-six-minute period in groups of three (Sayette 6). There were three conditions: groups that consumed alcohol, groups that did not consume alcohol, and groups that thought they were consuming alcohol but were not. None of the participants had any previous connection to the other participants

in their groups, so all relationships were built naturally in the study. This study indicated that a moderate dose of alcohol could positively affect an individual's emotions and ability to form connections with others (Sayette 15). In the case of college students, the consumption of alcohol may happen in settings where students are trying to form new relationships. Therefore, moderate doses of alcohol may positively impact the lives of college students and may allow for the growth of human connection.

The consumption of alcohol can create an environment where college students unwind and create connections. However, a high consumption level can create physical and mental health problems in the present and future. College students may use alcohol to relieve themselves from the pressures of the college lifestyle and incorporate themselves into social situations. Some students use alcohol to deal with their mental health issues, while others consume alcohol and create mental health problems placing them in a downward spiral. Some students are unaware of the health problems that alcohol can increase the risk of developing and, therefore, may be unconcerned with the amount of alcohol they consume. A good night's sleep is vital to maintaining a healthy mind and body. However, alcohol can irregulate sleep cycles, thus affecting the importance of a student's sleep cycle. The classic college lifestyle commonly includes drinking alcohol. Although there can be many negative impacts on an individual's health, alcohol can connect people and allow students to learn, grow, make mistakes, and have fun.

Works Cited

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