

ALCOHOL AND YOU

Alcohol



BEYOND ALCOHOL, WITHIN YOURSELF

As you transition to college, one of the decisions that you and your classmates face deals with alcohol. While most of you faced decisions about alcohol as high school students or even as middle school students, new situations appear every day. Research tells us that most students entering college have already been faced with decisions about alcohol, a large number have consumed alcohol, have had several drinks at a time, or have been drunk. As a new student, regardless of your personal experience, you will make a variety of decisions based on new situations and opportunities. You might feel the pressure to drink. You may just want to try something different.

Whether you feel sure or unsure about what you really want to do, here are ten important thoughts to consider:

1. ***You are personally responsible for making your own decisions.*** Every time you're faced with an alcohol-related situation, it's your choice whether to be responsible or not, and to accept the consequences should something negative happen. It is always your personal choice. It's important to remember that you can always reverse bad decisions from the past by making good decisions now. If you're unhappy with the consequences of your actions, it's in your power to change your actions going forward.
2. ***Setting personal, informed guidelines to help with your decision-making is helpful.*** These guidelines relate to your health, safety (both for you and others), the law, and ethical issues. For example, if you choose to drink alcohol, it's important to know your personal limits; some individuals can handle more than others for a number of physiological reasons. It's also important to know how legal standards relate to your and others' safety. For instance, driving and drinking is neither legal



nor safe. It's vital to know how you will get home safely, whether it's with a designated driver or using public transportation.

3. ***As you establish personal guidelines it's important to remember what the policies, regulations, ordinances, and laws are.*** For most new college students, alcohol may not be allowed due to both state and local laws, as well as campus policies. Nationally, the legal age for purchasing alcohol is 21; campus regulations are created in accordance with these laws. Keep in mind that you are not only responsible for your behavior, but you also have control over the situations in which you find yourself.
4. ***It's smart to talk with friends about your personal decisions and guidelines, even though it may not always be comfortable for you.*** Keeping your friends in the loop not only builds respect, but also makes it easier for you to set up healthy expectations about drinking in the future. Talking with others can help you negotiate appropriate decisions and guidelines. You may even convince some of your friends to make different choices for themselves.
5. ***If you drink alcohol, know the reasons why.*** If you're under the legal drinking age and choose to drink, what is it that you seek by drinking? In most cases, laws exist for our safety. Regardless of that fact, finding alternative ways to achieve a similar satisfaction without drinking alcohol can only serve to strengthen your creativity and self-identity. Experience life one step at a time. Find the lifestyle that's right for you.

When we ask students to identify why they drink, the reasons seem to boil down into four large categories: Physical (effects on the human body), Emotional (ways it makes you feel), Social (how you relate to others), and Cognitive (how you think).

Typical reasons include:

Physical:

- To relax
- To relieve stress
- To get drunk
- To forget about problems
- To reduce a hangover
- To get a buzz

Emotional:

- To feel good
- To gain confidence
- To numb emotions
- To drown sorrows
- To escape
- To enjoy life

Cognitive:

- To be more creative
- To avoid guilt
- Because it's a tradition
- To organize thoughts
- Because it's easy to get
- As a rite of passage

Social:

- To loosen up
- To be friendly
- To celebrate
- To be liked
- To meet people
- Because others do it

6. ***Know the facts about alcohol.*** While most of you may know a lot about alcohol, there are many facts that are not fully known or understood.



For example:

- Alcohol acts as a depressant, even though it has some stimulating properties.
- The chemical formula of alcohol is similar to that of ether, a substance that was used, until recent years, to anesthetize patients in preparation for surgery so they wouldn't feel any pain.
- The amount of alcohol in a standard size mixed drink, beer, and glass of wine is the same.
- Students typically overestimate the number of other students who drink, as well as the amount they drink. So, to answer the question "Is everyone really drinking?", data shows the number to be much lower than you think. Your perception of others' alcohol use is just that – a perception.
- The human brain is not fully developed until a person is in their 20s; therefore, alcohol negatively affects younger people in a different way than it affects those in their 20s or older.

Here are some recent statistics from a national perspective:

- Over one-half (51%) of adult Americans age 21 or older report not drinking alcohol during the previous month.
- National survey data shows that 69% of traditional age college students have used alcohol during the previous 30 days. Use during the previous year is reported by 83% of students, and lifetime use is reported by 85%.
- Several national surveys show that approximately 40% of college and university students engage in heavy episodic drinking (often called "binge" drinking), typically defined as consuming 5 or more drinks in a row for men and 4 or more in a row for women at least once in the past 2 weeks. The fact that this rate has not changed markedly over the past 20 years is noteworthy.
- Approximately 1,400 alcohol-related deaths, 500,000 alcohol-related unintentional injuries, and 70,000 alcohol-related sexual assaults or date rapes occur each year among college students aged 18 to 24 years. An additional 600,000 students aged 18 to 24 are assaulted by another student who has been drinking.
- Nearly 1/3 of college students drink for the sole purpose of getting drunk. The average consumption of alcoholic beverages is 34 gallons per student per year.



- A large majority of problems on college campuses nationwide are related to alcohol abuse. For example, 58% of residence hall damage and 58% of campus policy violations are alcohol-related. Nearly two-thirds (61%) of violent behavior and over one-third (39%) of physical injury is related to alcohol. Alcohol is reported to be involved with 33% of lack of academic success, 27% of student attrition, and 34% of diminished performance on a test or project.

7. ***Know the negative consequences to drinking.*** Just as students report various reasons for drinking (see #5), they also report a wide variety of negative consequences directly associated with their drinking. It's important to know what these consequences are in order to reduce them in the future; the ideal way to minimize these may be to refrain from drinking altogether. This is particularly true from a legal perspective, with the legal age of purchase being 21. Whether you drink or you don't, you can't protect yourself against them without making responsible decisions.

Typical consequences include:

Physical:

- Passing out
- Limited judgment
- Personal injury
- Alcohol poisoning
- Sexual assault or rape
- Loss of coordination

Emotional:

- Loss of confidence
- Being irritable
- Guilt about use
- Easily moved emotionally
- Anxiety
- Depression

Cognitive:

- Memory loss
- Forgetfulness
- Decreased attention
- Slurred speech
- Difficulty concentrating
- Irrational judgment

Social:

- Undeveloped social skills
- Isolation
- Legal consequences
- Making embarrassing comments
- Damaging friendships
- Driving under the influence

8. ***Alcohol affects everyone differently.*** While alcohol has effects that are generally consistent, each individual is affected differently, based on a variety of factors. These are based on gender, body weight, the amount of alcohol consumed, expectations, and prior experience. So, just because a friend or acquaintance experiences certain effects resulting from alcohol use, does not mean that you will experience similar effects. Furthermore, effects you might experience today may be somewhat different from what you experience tomorrow.

9. ***Alcohol is linked to background.*** Alcohol is often linked with an individual's family background, whether having parents, grandparents, siblings and/or friends who had problems with their use of alcohol. Some of you and some of your classmates may experience issues relating to alcohol and family. This may present unique challenges for you. Some of you have used alcohol to an unhealthy level prior to college and may be in recovery. Still others may be progressing in their



addiction, and may not realize it until later (for some, never). While the vast majority of those who use alcohol during their lives can do so without major problems or addiction, it's important to realize that different individuals have different experiences with alcohol. Keep an open mind.

10. ***Get involved.*** In the college environment, whether you live on campus or off campus, you will undoubtedly find many opportunities that involve alcohol – some of these are social situations, others are problematic incidents, and still others may involve someone's over consumption and/or illegal use of alcohol. Based on what you see, you may have some concerns about someone else's harmful involvement or negative consequences. You may wonder what you can do about this. What is important is that you do respond to these situations – your actual response will vary based on the situation, how well you know the person, your own values, and what you're actually comfortable doing. There may be situations that your decision to act could save a person's life and other situations where you might demonstrate your genuine concern and care for that person. What is important is to speak up about what you believe, and to act on these beliefs. If you're not quite sure what to do, it's always good to seek advice or counsel from someone else who has experience, training, or other insight. You may seek assistance with a staff member, a counselor, a mentor, or, in a crisis situation, by calling emergency services (e.g., 911). The important thing is to get involved with those around you, just as you would want them to get involved with you!

For all of the decisions about alcohol, the choices are yours. The bottom line is simple: it's up to you to make personal, informed choices. These choices affect your life, as well as the lives of others. Your college experience is made up of numerous individual and group-related situations. You'll be influenced by friends, staff, faculty members and others; similarly, you will have influence over them. The challenges you may face with alcohol can be used to your advantage. Learn from these challenges and savor your college experience!

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