



Employee NEWSLETTER

Employee Assistance Program
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Dispelling Myths About Social Drinking

Enjoying wine, beer or spirits is a common activity in many social situations. Although alcohol can be viewed as a good way to relax and unwind, it's important to note that behavioral influences play an important role in determining how much alcohol a person consumes and its subsequent effect on activities and emotions.

"Alcohol is a social lubricant," explains G. Alan Marlatt, Ph.D., professor of psychology at the University of Washington. "A person's drinking behavior is motivated to a large extent by social anxieties and psychological expectations."

To help gain an understanding of alcohol in social settings, Dr. Marlatt, who has conducted extensive research on social drinking, provides insight into some commonly held beliefs about alcohol consumption.

Myth #1: A person who drinks will be more sociable than a person who doesn't.

Reality #1: Although a drink or two can help an anxious person feel more relaxed, alcohol alone does not make a person more attractive, interesting or witty.

"People have strong beliefs about how alcohol changes behavior," Dr. Marlatt says. "We've found that people's beliefs about how they appear while drinking differ from the perceptions of others around them."

Dr. Marlatt says, for example, that men may think they're more attractive after having a few drinks. Yet when women are asked about these men, they don't agree.

Myth #2: People who drink can't help how they act.

Reality #2: Alcohol can have physical and emotional effects, but Dr. Marlatt explains that a person's reactions to drinking are equally controlled by psychological perceptions.

In a study by Dr. Marlatt, young male drinkers were given drinks they thought contained alcohol, but, in fact, did not. As the subjects consumed the "alcoholic" drinks, their behavior changed dramatically, becoming more aggressive, loud and flirtatious.

"People have been conditioned to believe they'll react in certain ways if they consume alcohol," Dr. Marlatt said. "It's more about you and where you decide to put yourself that controls how you will act when drinking."

Myth #3: People feel better if they drink.

Reality #3: Although drinking provides a social and behavioral disinhibition which may be experienced as a stimulating effect, it has diminishing effects over time, including slow speech, reduced coordination, and depression.

"People unrealistically think of alcohol as a magic elixir," Dr. Marlatt says. "They don't seem to remember the corresponding negative effects that go along with alcohol consumption, such as hangovers and depression."

Staying in control

Being a smart social drinker requires staying in control, setting limits and realizing how your perceptions and surroundings can affect your behavior.

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If you're planning to attend an event where you don't know many people, determine beforehand how many drinks you will have. By drinking slowly and being aware of your surroundings, you can stay in control and not feel easily swayed into drinking more than you normally might.

"A good social drinker is knowledgeable about alcohol," Dr. Marlatt says. "You know your limits, you know to eat before you drink, and you know that consuming alcohol is not going to change you into a better person."

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