

Romantic relationships mitigate effects of trauma on alcohol use among college students

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Students who have been exposed to interpersonal trauma—physical assault, sexual assault or unwanted sexual experiences—prior to college are more likely to engage in risky alcohol use. But romantic relationships mitigate these effects of trauma on a student's drinking behavior, according to a new study led by Virginia Commonwealth University researchers.

The study investigates whether romantic relationships might play a role in mitigating or exacerbating the effects of trauma exposure on alcohol use among [college students](#). It found that students who experienced interpersonal trauma during college consumed more alcohol than those without interpersonal trauma exposure, and that their drinking was more pronounced for those in a relationship with a partner with higher levels of alcohol use. It also found that a student's satisfaction in their romantic relationship did not change the association between interpersonal trauma and alcohol use.

Previous research has found that college students who have been exposed to interpersonal trauma are more likely to engage in risky alcohol use. Yet not everyone who experiences interpersonal trauma goes on to misuse alcohol, raising questions about what factors might play a role in the interaction of trauma and drinking.

The study, "A Longitudinal Study of the Moderating Effects of Romantic Relationships on the Associations Between Alcohol Use and Trauma in College Students," will be published in a forthcoming issue of the journal *Addiction*. It explores whether three aspects of romantic relationships—relationship status, relationship satisfaction and partner alcohol use—change the associations between interpersonal trauma and alcohol use.

"These findings are important because they help elucidate the ways that romantic relationships can improve or undermine health habits, particularly concerning alcohol consumption," said lead author Rebecca Smith, a doctoral student in the Department of Psychology in the College of Humanities and Sciences. "A better understanding of the ways that social relationships can influence health behaviors might encourage people to carefully consider the people with whom they spend time. Moreover, these findings help us better understand alcohol use risk and protective factors across the lifespan, which can be used to inform prevention and treatment programs."

Jessica Salvatore, Ph.D., an assistant professor in the Department of Psychology and the senior author on the study, said the findings "underscore the double-edged role that relationships and partners have on health behaviors in college."

"On the one hand, we found that involvement in a

committed relationship buffered the effects of interpersonal trauma exposure on students' alcohol use," she said. "On the other, we found that involvement with a heavier drinking partner amplified the association between exposure and alcohol use."

Smith said she was surprised that relationship satisfaction was not a significant moderator of the associations between interpersonal trauma and alcohol use.

"Based on previous research suggesting that involvement in satisfying relationships is protective against stress and problematic drinking, we had hypothesized that high relationship satisfaction would buffer against the effects of interpersonal trauma on alcohol use," she said.

The study relied on data collected through Spit for Science, a universitywide project at VCU in which student volunteers provide information on alcohol, substance use, emotional health and more, and contribute DNA samples that provide insight into the role of genetics. The study involved nearly 9,000 students who participated in Spit for Science between 2011 and 2014.

Participants completed baseline assessments during the fall of their freshman year and were invited to complete follow-up assessments every spring thereafter. Participants were included in the study if they completed surveys at baseline and at least one follow-up assessment.

"Each year, participants answered questions about stressful life events they may have experienced, their quantity and frequency of alcohol consumption, and their romantic relationships," Smith said. "This allowed us to look at the interplay between interpersonal trauma, alcohol use and romantic relationship characteristics over time."

The study's findings could be valuable for efforts to increase awareness and education for college students about the ways in which our social ties can promote or undermine health behaviors, like alcohol use, Smith said.

Additionally, she said, the findings could be applied

as part of treatment to reduce unsafe drinking.

"We know from previous research that exposure to interpersonal trauma is associated with risky [alcohol](#) use, so romantic partners can be included in treatment planning and aftercare to help [trauma](#) survivors cope with traumatic events in healthier ways and reduce engagement in risky drinking behaviors," she said.

In addition to Smith and Salvatore, the study's co-authors include Danielle Dick, Ph.D., Distinguished Commonwealth Professor in the Departments of Psychology and Human and Molecular Genetics at VCU; Ananda Amstadter, Ph.D., associate professor in the Virginia Institute for Psychiatric and Behavioral Genetics at VCU; Nathaniel Thomas, a doctoral student in the Department of Psychology; and the Spit for Science Working Group.

More information: A longitudinal study of the moderating effects of romantic relationships on the associations between alcohol use and trauma in college students, *Addiction* (2021). onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/add.15490

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