



Heavy Episodic Drinking Among Post-secondary Students: Influencing Factors and Implications

Heavy episodic drinking poses potentially serious health and safety risks to young adults, particularly post-secondary students. The study, [Heavy Episodic Drinking among Post-secondary Students: Influencing Factors and Implications](#), examined student perceptions and attitudes, expectations, reasons and consequences influencing heavy episodic drinking. The study also explored three high-risk drinking issues: alcohol-induced blackouts, pre-drinking and drinking to cope. The findings from the report continue to demonstrate the extreme nature of heavy episodic drinking and the risks posed to students. In response, this study suggests that improved and broadened student education on heavy episodic drinking is needed, and that students and institutions each need to play a role in reducing the associated harms. One opportunity to help institutions is the Postsecondary Education Partnership- Alcohol Harms (PEP-AH), a group of Canadian postsecondary institutions that work to reduce the harms of alcohol on Canadian campuses (see more on the [PEP-AH website](#)).

Key Messages

- Pre-drinking, or drinking before going to a larger party or bar, appears to be riskier due to the uncontrolled environment and the overall excessive drinking that often takes place, including later at the party or bar, which can lead to increased negative consequences.
- Heavy episodic drinking is not recognized as a serious issue by most participants, but is a continued concern for the negative short- and long-term consequences of drinking.
- Despite reporting largely negative experiences, participants perceive drinking as predominantly positive, with minimal health or safety risks, and as an expected part of the post-secondary experience.
- Many students report negative experiences from heavy episodic drinking such as fighting, blacking out, getting injured, having non-consensual sex, being hungover and vomiting.
- Some participants report drinking alcohol as a coping mechanism to reduce stress or anxiety, and often do not appear aware of alternative coping methods.
- Participants suggest a combination of peer-to-peer education and accurate, factual information from respected older adults to supplement peer education in reducing the harms of heavy episodic drinking.



Why Does this Matter?

Studies show that post-secondary students drink more than their non-student peers and are subject to a number of short-term negative consequences associated with heavy episodic drinking, including blacking out, impaired driving, injury, and physical or sexual violence (Butt, Beirness, Gliksman, Paradis, & Stockwell, 2011; Caudwell, Mullan, & Hagger, 2016; Park & Grant, 2005; White & Hingson, 2014). They are also at risk of long-term harms, including significant cognitive, structural and functional brain changes, various cancers, cirrhosis of the liver and heart disease (Butt et al., 2011). We conducted this research to learn more about student reasons for heavy drinking and the consequences they experienced as a result, as well as to collect their ideas and recommendations to address the issue and to help fill a gap in qualitative data on the issue. This information can help parents, teachers, post-secondary health and safety personnel, and administrators develop preventive methods and structure appropriate responses to mitigate alcohol harms.

Heavy Episodic Drinking

A pattern of drinking where a female consumes more than three drinks per occasion or a male consumes more than four drinks per occasion. Heavy episodic drinking has been associated with blacking out, impaired driving, injury, and physical or sexual violence (Butt, et al., 2011; Caudwell, et al., 2016; Park & Grant, 2005; White & Hingson, 2014)

What Did We Do?

The Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction (CCSA) initiated this research by collecting data from focus groups at five post-secondary institutions across Canada, with a total of 110 participants, 27 male and 83 female, ranging in age from 17 to 30 years, with a majority in the age range 18 to 22 years. Focus groups ranged from one to 10 participants (averaging four to six participants). All participants were screened in to the focus groups based on self-reported drinking behaviours that met excessive drinking conditions (consuming four or more standard drinks for females or five or more standard drinks for males, once a month or more). Participants were asked a series of questions related to their experiences with heavy episodic drinking and their recommendations on how to address it. The qualitative data was transcribed and coded, and we conducted a thematic analysis of the resulting data. A second staff member reviewed and validated all coding throughout the analysis. Ethics approval and participant consent were obtained.

What Did We Find?

A number of important findings were identified about student perceptions and attitudes towards alcohol, expectations about excessive drinking, reasons for excessive drinking, positive and negative consequences experienced from drinking, and student suggestions for addressing the issue.

General Findings

- The majority of students did not recognize what constituted heavy episodic drinking, did not see it as an issue in the post-secondary context, and considered drinking a part of the post-secondary experience.
- Most students stated that the average student could consume as many as five drinks on a single occasion before experiencing negative consequences, with some noting up to as many as 10 drinks before experiencing negative consequences.



- Most students used physical responses such as vomiting and blacking out as their indicator of negative consequences.
- The majority of students expected drinking to help them have a good time, relax and be less stressed.
- Students reported drinking to excess to have fun, socialize, mitigate peer pressure, overcome boredom and make up for times when drinking was not possible (e.g., exams).
- Student blackouts due to drinking were primarily accidental, often a result of inexperience with alcohol (commonly reported with drinking by first-year students), drinking games, not monitoring drinking and drinking excessively at a pre-drinking event.
- Pre-drinking – drinking at home or a friend’s before going to a party or bar or club – was considered a good way to connect with friends and socialize, but was often associated with drinking excessively over the course of an evening. Reasons for this result included that students were trying to drink quickly to avoid spending money at a club or bar, felt pressure to drink more and were not monitoring their drinking in these informal contexts.
- Some students reported drinking to avoid studying or assignments, to lower anxiety when writing a paper or to help them fall asleep. Other students reported drinking excessively to be more outgoing, increase their confidence and deal with social anxiety.

Perceptions and Attitudes

- Generally, students did not recognize their drinking behaviours as harmful.
- Most students acknowledged that experiences with alcohol change over time, where first-year students tend to have less experience with alcohol and experience greater harms because they do not understand their limits. Students in later years reported having fewer negative experiences with alcohol because they believed they had a better understanding of their limits, were not seeking to become as drunk and had found like-minded peers who also did not want to drink as much.
- The majority of students acknowledged some harms from alcohol, while still highlighting positive experiences like meeting new people, bonding with friends and having fun.

Key Reasons Driving Heavy Episodic Drinking

- The majority of students emphasized drinking to socialize, have fun and be with friends, and often drank excessively to remain intoxicated.
- Many students highlighted the pervasiveness of drinking culture on campuses (including in sports, sororities or fraternities, and in some faculty clubs and events), along with explicit peer pressure to keep up with others’ drinking through challenges (e.g., drinking games) or through social practices such as buying rounds of drinks.
- Very few students acknowledged drinking to cope when asked about it explicitly. However, many described situations that would be considered drinking to cope, such as drinking to reduce anxiety, avoid studying, help them fall asleep or help them write a paper.
- Some students highlighted drinking due to boredom and having nothing else to do. Similarly, many reported that during the evenings there were no alternative activities or venues to bars or parties, or the alternatives closed too early.



Positive and Negative Consequences of Heavy Episodic Drinking

- The majority of students emphasized what they characterized as fun, positive, memory building experiences associated with drinking such as fun with friends, reducing their inhibitions to be more social or meeting new people.
- Many students also discussed what they characterized as negative experiences, including doing things they regretted, sleeping with people they would not have otherwise, having to take care of drunk friends, being injured, not remembering what they did, becoming separated from their friends, feeling sick, vomiting or being hungover.
- Negative consequences of blacking out described by students included waking up with bruises, being unsure of what they did and, in some instances, having non-consensual sex.
- Students emphasized pre-drinking as positive, where they enjoyed time with friends and playing drinking games, and most emphasized the need for pre-drinking to avoid expensive bar bills.
- Negative consequences of pre-drinking for some students were overall excessive drinking, blacking out, vomiting or being involved in conflicts and physical violence, and often experienced later in the evening during the main event.

Student Ideas to Reduce Heavy Episodic Drinking

We asked students for their ideas on how to address heavy drinking among students. Their recommendations included:

- Most students suggested receiving education and prevention messages from peers as more appealing and relatable, but also acknowledged the need for accurate information from respected adults.
- Some students highlighted the effectiveness of education through personal stories of alcohol harms from other students, while others felt that was fear mongering and would turn them off.
- Most students emphasized the desire to normalize drinking (e.g., drinking in moderation), rather than condemn it.
- The majority of students highlighted approaches that they did not feel were effective, including bans on alcohol, as it potentially tempts students to rebel and drink more in private where they could be at greater risk.
- Students suggested the need to offer alternatives to drinking-focused activities or locations (e.g., bars), such as opening up other venues that are desirable and interesting to students to socialize late at night.
- Students recommended a number of protective behavioural strategies for students, including planning, such as bringing a set amount of money to a bar or club or a set amount of alcohol for pre-drinking occasions, asking friends to monitor or stop their drinking after a specified amount, and also consuming non-alcoholic drinks during drinking occasions (e.g., drinking games).
- Many students highlighted the need to educate adolescents long before they enter post-secondary studies so that they are adequately prepared. Some students begin drinking when they are younger and they lack information about what factors contribute to alcohol harms (e.g., bodyweight, sex, pace of drinking, etc.). A number of students stated that learning about harms after entering a post-secondary institution (e.g., frosh week) is too late.



What Can You Do?

Those who work with students in post-secondary settings can use this qualitative data to inform and reinforce their work on campuses.

- Provide students with effective messages to reduce the harms of heavy episodic drinking by testing various methods for effectiveness. Students are not receiving, not remembering or disregarding some of the information that does exist on reducing harm. Use evidence-based research (through resources such as the [PEP-AH Framework](#)) and involve students in the development of techniques to reduce harms associated with excessive drinking.
- Students need tools and methods to help them deal with peer pressure and turn down alcohol when they do not want to consume it, whether it be pressure that comes from direct challenges (e.g., drinking games) or social pressure (e.g., friends buying rounds of drinks).
- Help students properly recognize and effectively evaluate the real impact of their own negative experiences with alcohol. Encourage secondary schools to address alcohol consumption before students enter post-secondary education.
- Consider using appropriate research techniques such as focus groups, questionnaires and other forms of engagement to understand student perspectives on drinking and reducing heavy episodic drinking as they apply to your institution and student drinking patterns.
- Findings from this study suggest that it could be useful to develop methods that help students who do not want to drink excessively to identify like-minded friends earlier on, particularly in their first year. In contrast, some students might enjoy or want to drink to excess and could benefit from being a part of social groups that discourage this motivation.
- There are somewhat effective interventions to reduce pre-drinking behaviours (Burger, LaSalvia, Hendricks, Mehdipour, & Neudeck, 2011), but no studies that demonstrate effectiveness in reducing pre-drinking (Ahmed, Hustad, LaSalle, & Borsari, 2014; Borsari, Merrill, Yurasek, Miller, & Carey, 2016). Given the serious risks associated with pre-drinking, more studies on how to address this drinking behaviour are required.
- Respected peers, such as residence assistant or advisors, or older students can be an effective source for delivering messaging since young adults often take their cues from their peers (Borsari, et al., 2007; Neighbors, Lee, Lewis, Fossos, & Larimer, 2007). Institutions can determine what information peers should deliver and what information respected older adults should deliver. Role models also require appropriate vetting and training, as some respected peers who provided safe drinking education have been known to engage in excessive drinking, and other peers reported that they did not feel they had the knowledge to properly educate students.

Where Can You Learn More?

CCSA works with campuses to reduce harms from alcohol through PEP-AH. Find the full report and more information about alcohol and youth on the CCSA [PEP-AH webpage](#). You can also find the full report and more information about PEP-AH at [pepah.ca](#) and on the [PEP-AH Resources page](#). See all current PEP-AH members from across Canada at the [PEP-AH Members page](#).



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