



The Evidence (transcript)

Season 1, Episode 2

Topic: Low-Risk Alcohol Drinking Guidelines

[00:20]

[music]

[00:07]

[ANNOUNCER:] You're listening to The Evidence—knowledge that inspires. The Evidence, produced by the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction

[0:41]

[Lee Arbon:] Welcome to The Evidence, a podcast created by the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction. We're your hosts, Lee Arbon...

[Amanda Deseure:] ...and Amanda Deseure. Today we're exploring the evidence on alcohol and low-risk drinking guidelines. But what exactly is a drink? A pint of beer or a shot of whisky? Find out on today's episode as we explore the low-risk drinking guidelines and dangerous alcohol consumption on campus. We're joined by Bryce Barker, a leading national researcher on alcohol, and Amanda Neilson, a social worker specializing in substance use and adult education.

[LA:] We'll be right back with the first guest of today's episode.

[Announcer:] This is The Evidence. If you find today's topic interesting, be sure to visit ccsa.ca for more information.

[AD:] Our first guest today is Bryce Barker. Bryce is a knowledge broker at CCSA who specializes in alcohol. We're thrilled to have you with us today, Bryce.

[Bryce Barker:] Thanks—really happy to be here.

[AD:] Glad you were able to brave the December weather and join us even though it's super cold outside right now.

[BB:] It's getting there. Yep!

[AD:] So, we're headed into the holiday season: office parties, New Year's, holiday dinners. Does drinking increase with all these social events?

[BB:] Yeah, we would see people drinking more as the holidays approach, and then throughout the holidays. So, really it's just a function of social gatherings where alcohol is being served—it's on the table. So, we really do see that there's just more opportunities for people to drink, and generally they do tend to drink more often, oftentimes leading to those new year's resolutions that involve alcohol,



where people felt like they indulged too much, too long, too many times over the holidays. For a lot of people, that becomes part of their new year's resolution.

[2:36]

[AD:] For people who don't drink typically or drink as much, do they end up drinking more?

[BB:] I would think that you know people who drink more occasionally, they feel like compelled to drink, they feel compelled to join the party, to be social, and with alcohol, more often than they might feel like doing otherwise, especially more occasional drinkers.

[AD:] And for people who are going out, who are drinking more, for people who maybe don't really drink but are drinking because they you know kind of maybe feel like they should be, or if it's just part of the environment, are there guidelines for them, maybe to help reduce harms—if there is a spike in harms—maybe there's not. Or maybe even just to scale back on some embarrassing situations that might happen.

[BB:] Yeah, we do have—CCSA has low-risk drinking guidelines, and they're really developed with a few different things in mind. But, definitely one of them, are things like you're saying, so occasional harms... we call it that. Short-term harms, could be social harms, so doing things you regret later or feel embarrassed by... and the guidelines themselves are for females two drinks on any given occasion, 10 per week. An extra drink on special occasions, so three drinks. For men, three drinks on any occasion, so 15 a week, and again an extra one allowed for special occasions.

[AD:] So, I can have 10 drinks every week and be totally fine, golden, good to go.

[BB:] Well, I think you know a few things to realize about low-risk drinking guidelines: they're not there to tell you you should drink, they're not there to tell you you shouldn't drink. They're there as a guideline. When they're put together with an expert group, really what they were looking for was the number of drinks beyond which you increased your risk of all-cause mortality, meaning beyond that number of drinks, I'm actually increasing my chances of dying in a way that's related to my alcohol intake. So, again I think it's always worthwhile to think 10 or less, 15 or less, and to think about your own health and your own circumstances. Um so you know you might have... be at risk of a disease or you might be working through a chronic disease, and so that would really suggest a far lower limit for you to help you be healthy. And so that's really the main point around these.

[5:00]

[AD:] OK, 10 or less, that probably makes more sense. And what is an actual drink? I mean, some people say a drink is one shot, two shots, it might be you know a pint of beer. What is an actual standard drink in Canada?

[BB:] So, the way that that's broken down um is really in reference to the amount of alcohol that's in a drink, so you could think about that in millilitres or grams. So, it's 13.45 g or 17 mL of alcohol. And that's the exact amount in a 341 mL bottle of beer, that's about 5% alcohol. So again that's a standard bottle of beer, and there are the same amounts of alcohol in different drinks, so the actual drinks, so a cider or a cooler that's 5%, again they come in the same size standard bottle, so that has the exact same amount of alcohol in it. Wine, so 12% wine, that's 142 mL, or for distilled alcohol, for liquor, that's 1.5 oz or 42 mL. But all of them have in common that same amount of alcohol. And there's a whole separate push; sometimes public health units will go out and try to educate the public about standard drink sizes. And the reason is that you can really underestimate how much you're drinking, because you're having pints or you're having a mixed drink and someone's putting two shots or more in that mixed drink, and you're thinking oh I had a drink, I had two drinks, but really you had a pint or you had a mixed drink with more alcohol than a standard



drink. And as a result, you can really underestimate, sometimes up to 30%. You know you think you had X amount of alcohol, but you actually had Y. It could be a really substantial amount of alcohol more.

[AD:] So you're saying that even though you went out and you bought a drink, say you had a gin and tonic or something, and you think I had one drink, but maybe they actually put 2 oz of gin in it. And it's only an ounce and a half that's considered a standard drink, you should kind of, you know, build that into your plan for the night then. Maybe you drank more on this one, maybe your next one might have to be a little lighter.

[7:14]

[BB:] That could be the case, especially if you're in a social setting where it's not someone who's measuring alcohol and selling it to you. It's at a house party or that kind of thing. Sometimes we use the term "free pour." So if someone isn't necessarily measuring out the alcohol, they're just sort of putting ice into a glass and pouring alcohol onto that and mixing it up on their own, they might think more in terms of how strong a drink or how strong a drink is or you know what they're hoping that the drink tastes like as opposed to the actual amount of alcohol in it, so again those are the kinds of situations where it's good to have an idea how much alcohol you're drinking.

[AD:] It's a good reminder going into the holidays with all these home parties and office parties where we're not always measuring with shot glasses sometimes.

[BB:] No no. Absolutely, yep.

[AD:] And, where would we find this information? Could we find pictures of this so we could see it? So, the CCSA website has the low-risk drinking guidelines. It's all there. We also recently released a social media toolkit. And that has the guidelines themselves, there's some illustrations, safer drinking tips are really useful also this time of year, so really briefly like have a non-alcoholic drink for every alcoholic drink you have; eat some food before and while drinking; set a limit. You're talking about thinking about how many drinks you've had, and really going into an evening, think about what's a reasonable amount of drinks for you on that evening, and stick to that limit. So, a number of safer drinking tips that I think are really helpful if people can know what they are and make an effort to use them, things that can help you again avoid that embarrassing situation or sometimes more substantial harms from drinking too much.

[9:04]

[AD:] That's incredible. Thank you so much for joining us today, Bryce. That's very useful information. I hope our listeners will find it very helpful as they plan for their holidays. For anyone listening who's interested, you can find this information on www.ccsa.ca under the "Alcohol" tab. Thank you, Bryce.

[Announcer:] You are listening to The Evidence. Visit ccsa.ca to find previous episodes of our show.

[Lee Arbon:] Alright, we're back on The Evidence with our next guest, Amanda Neilson, who is a harm reduction consultant and an adult addictions counsellor. Amanda, thank you for joining us today.

[Amanda Neilson:] Thank you so much for having me.

[LA:] Now, getting ready for our interview I noticed that you do a lot of work with Algonquin College.

[AN:] I do; so I work with Rideauwood Addiction and Family Services, and part of my portfolio is being at Algonquin College three days a week. So, this is a partnership that was created four years ago between Rideauwood Addiction and Family Services and Algonquin College with the purpose of developing a harm reduction framework for post-secondary institutions. We wanted to create



something that would be embedded into the culture of the campus and to be able to change the culture of substance use.

[LA:] And from what I understand one of the really unique things about what you've created is that any university or college can take this model and build their own.

[10:26]

[AN:] Exactly, we encourage all colleges and universities from anywhere to be able to take what we've done and really adapt it for their own community. Every campus is different, every campus has a different feel. And so, one of my biggest pet peeves is the idea of reinventing the wheel. And so, we have limited resources. It's so frustrating to take those resources and put it towards things that other people have already done. So, we've created the framework that we're working from, and everything we've done is free. Everything is available on our website. We have a toolkit that other colleges and universities can take and see all the different sections that we have the harm-reduction framework in. That includes games—online games. It includes posters. It includes the different sections. So, for example, we utilize PEP-AH's socio-ecological framework. So that means that we work with policy recommendations, we work with staff and faculty by doing training. We also provide information for students who may be using, and so we provide information on how to use it safer. We also support students who are maybe struggling. And because we're coming from a harm reduction position, it's all about creating this idea of people make the best decisions for themselves, and if we can give them credible information, that just adds to their ability to do that.

[LA:] Now you mentioned PEP-AH. Can you tell us a little bit more what that organization does...?

[AN:] Yeah so PEP-AH is the Post-Secondary Education Partnership on Alcohol Harms, and it's really about—kind of again the idea of let's not reinvent the wheel—of gathering people to come together to talk about how we can address alcohol harms on the campuses across Canada.

[12:25]

[LA:] Now, through PEP-AH, through your work at Algonquin College, you work obviously very closely with the students. How have you seen the students react to what you do?

[AN:] They love it! So on our tables, anytime that we're doing information tables, we have on them our Safer Cannabis pamphlets, our Safer Drinking pamphlets, our Low-Risk Drinking Guidelines, our Safer MDMA pamphlets, and instantaneously that sends the message to students that this is a safe place to talk about it. And, so we have students who will come up and say, "I've never used but I have friends who do. I'm just gonna take a couple pamphlets." We have students who come up and go... open up the pamphlets and go, "I can't believe you're talking about this!" and then will sit there and share with their friends: "Hey I told you! I told you that holding smoke inside your lungs for a long time won't get you higher." We have students who will come up and talk about how they've struggled with use in the past and are no longer using. So one of our biggest aims with the Umbrella Project is creating a safer space for students to be able to talk about substance use; because when there's that nonjudgmental and compassionate space, then we can give them the information they need so they can make the best decisions for themselves. So students are very open to it, and we know actually from an evidence-based approach and from research that harm reduction is the most effective way to talk to young adults about substance use.

[LA:] Yeah, and we had Bryce Barker on the show earlier today, and he was talking to us about different things, and a couple things he mentioned was one that students may not necessarily know what actually one drink is...

[AN:] Mmm hmm



[LA:] I was curious how you saw that with regard to being on campus, and do they know that?

[AN:] Mmm hmm

[LA:] And how do they take... you know, I'm a big proponent of not being told what to do, and you're not necessarily telling students what to do. You're trying to inform them.

[14:14]

[AN:] That's the beauty about harm reduction; the principle is that it accepts that there are positives to use as well as consequences to use. It accepts that everybody knows what's best for them. It also says that being able to give people multiple different options. So, making sure students have an understanding of what an actual drink is just better their ability to make decisions around it. What gets tricky about that is you have a population of students within the post-secondary institutions that want to get drunk, and so they're not concerned necessarily about limiting their drinking. So them knowing what one ounce is or that one ounce is equal to five ounces of wine is equal to a beer, or one and a half ounces of liquor is equal to one beer is equal to five ounces of wine. We want students to have that information, at the same time recognizing that they may take that information and just use it to get drunker quicker, which is where again the harm reduction comes in is if they're planning on using to the point of getting drunk, how do we make sure that they get to the right place, with the right person, with keys in hand, with their phone in hand and feeling OK the next day.

[LA:] And I think you know based on what we talked about, you've been doing this a long time; you've got 20 years' experience. How have you seen things change over that period of time with regard to attitudes towards alcohol amongst students?

[AN:] I don't know if a lot has changed. Now with the work that CCSA is doing, with the work that PEP-AH is doing, what we know is that research shows that there... we can do things to increase students'... their alcohol intelligence, or their understanding of alcohol, but we need to understand that we are an alcohol-loving society, and it's engrained in how we socialize, it's engrained in how we celebrate, it's engrained in how we mourn. And, we've embedded it so much into our structure that we've actually separated it from the whole drug category altogether. So, we tend to say alcohol and drugs, like alcohol isn't a part of that, and we sort of stigmatize drugs, and we keep alcohol nice and safe. I often think about how we definitely influence other people by saying, "Oh you got a new job, let me take you out for a drink." "You lost your job, let me take you out for a drink." "You got into school, let me take you out for a drink." "Oh, you're going to college, you gotta drink." Uh you know, all of these very important connections seem to revolve around alcohol, so why would we expect anything different from a group of young adults, who are going into colleges and universities, for many of them it's their first time away from home; they tend to have more access to money; they are in places where they don't know anybody. And we know that lots of people use drinking to socially connect, and so what we're trying to do at Algonquin College is shift that: yes there's drinking, and here are some other really great activities that don't involve alcohol. So, we're not eliminating the drinking, but we're hoping to add to the toolbox of how they can connect with other people.

[17:27]

[LA:] Very cool. Alright, I want to change gears just a little bit here and talk about this unique project you're doing at Algonquin College. It's called the Umbrella Project; can you give us a bit more information on that?

[AN:] You bet. The Umbrella Project, we're going into our third year at Algonquin College; it is a unique project, because it's the only one in North America that we're aware of. It talks about all substances from a harm reduction perspective, and it uses the PEP-AH's socio-ecological framework to be able



to immerse the harm reduction and immerse these conversations into the campus culture. So, for example, we participate in policy recommendations, we train staff and faculty, we create events and awareness materials for students. We also support students who may be struggling with their use of alcohol and other substances. This is a project that has many many different arms. One of the arms is that we have an online harm reduction game called RainyDaze, and RainyDaze actually won the silver “Prix D’Excellence” through the Canadian Council for the Advancement of Education. We’ve also won the best program in 2018 in residence from the Ontario college and university housing association, and we’re recognized as the best practice in the best practices in Canadian higher education network. So we’ve worked really hard over the last three, four years to be able to create something that’s effective. We know that harm reduction is one of the most effective approaches when it comes to educating young adults around substances, which also includes alcohol.

[LA:] Obviously by the number of awards it’s uh, won, this program is really well received. If people want to get some information on the Umbrella Project, where can they find it?

[AN:] You can go to algonquincollege.com/umbrellaproject, and there is our... actually we have online learning modules, and we also have our toolkit.

[19:21]

[LA:] Well, I wanna thank you for joining us today, coming in the cold grey weather and sharing with us some of the cool work you’re doing with students at Algonquin College.

[AN:] Thank you! My pleasure!

[Announcer:] Like our show? Have a comment or question? Want to suggest a guest for The Evidence? Email us at podcast@ccsa.ca and let us know. We want to hear your take on The Evidence.

[AD:] That’s it for this episode. Thank you to all of our listeners for tuning in, and a special thank you to Amanda Neilson and Bryce Barker for sharing their evidence with us today.

[LA:] I agree; thank you to them. But, before we go, we’ve got some really important information to share: for anyone who is interested in presenting at CCSA’s Issues of Substance conference next November in Ottawa, the call for abstracts is now open. And important to note that the final day to submit your abstract will be Monday, January 28, 2019. You can find out all the information on what’s required and how to submit your abstract on our website at ccsa.ca.

[AD:] That’s it for today. I’m Amanda Deseure.

[LA:] And I’m Lee Arbon. Happy Holidays!

[AD:] We’ll see you soon.

[Announcer:] This is *The Evidence*. If you find today’s topic interesting, be sure to visit ccsa.ca for more information. Technical and editing support for the podcast is handled by Christopher Austin. *The Evidence* is owned and produced by the Canadian Centre on Substance Use and Addiction. Copyright 2019.

[21:22] End of transcript