

RIA Reaching Others: Does Drinking Affect Marriage?



Alcohol use is common among married couples in the United States. Both husbands and wives regularly drink alcohol (i.e., at least once per month or more) in roughly half of all couples. Only a quarter of all couples do not drink regularly, while another quarter of those surveyed have a husband who drinks regularly while the wife does not. In a significant example of gender differences, only 5 percent of U.S. couples have a wife who drinks regularly and a husband who does not.

Heavy alcohol consumption—defined as 14 drinks per week or more for men and 10 for women—is less common among married couples. In 4 percent of married couples both partners drink heavily, while in 79 percent of couples neither partner is a heavy drinker. Again, there are gender differences, with 12 percent of couples having only a husband who drinks heavily, compared to just 5 percent where only the wife is a heavy drinker.

What are the consequences?

In many cases, people can drink moderate amounts of alcohol with relatively few negative consequences. However, heavier alcohol use can affect marriage in many adverse ways.

- ▶ Heavy drinking, alcohol problems and alcohol use disorders are all associated with lower marital satisfaction. This association is somewhat stronger when the husband is the problem drinker but is still apparent when the wife is the problem drinker.
- ▶ Alcohol use (by the perpetrator and/or the victim) is a contributing factor in domestic violence and aggression, both physical and psychological.
- ▶ Alcohol and substance use are among the most common reasons given for a divorce—the third most common reason for women and eighth most common for men. It is also one of the most common reasons given for seeking marriage counseling.
- ▶ Couples in which one spouse has an alcohol use disorder (usually alcohol dependence) experience more negative interactions and fewer positive interactions than couples in which neither spouse has an alcohol disorder.

The difference in drinking can make all the difference

When there is a large discrepancy in the amount of alcohol each spouse drinks, the consequences of heavy alcohol use can be at their most severe. On the other hand, some research indicates that spouses who drink together at similar amounts may not experience as many negative consequences. The findings show:

- ▶ Couples in which both spouses use alcohol heavily report higher marital satisfaction than couples in which one spouse uses alcohol heavily and the other does not.

How Does Drinking Affect Cohabiting and Same-Sex Relationships?

Although research has examined the effects of alcohol on heterosexual marriage, much less attention has been paid to the effect of alcohol on cohabiting and same-sex relationships. We know very little about whether or not alcohol affects cohabiting relationships differently than marriages. Research has shown that cohabiting couples tend to drink more alcohol than married couples, and they also tend to report lower relationship satisfaction, experience greater rates of physical aggression and are more likely to separate.

However, there is currently no evidence that the *association* between alcohol use and these negative consequences is any stronger in cohabiting couples than in married couples. The association itself may be the same, but these negative outcomes may be more prevalent because alcohol use itself is more prevalent.

Twenty-five percent of gay, lesbian and bisexual (GLB) people report heavy use of alcohol, compared to 5 to 10 percent of the general population, according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC). Rates of alcohol and other drug use may be higher in these groups due to greater general stress (e.g., from discrimination), more active social lives or differences in the availability and affordability of health care and substance abuse treatment services. Health insurance

continued on other side



- ▶ Couples in which both spouses have an alcohol use disorder experience more positive interactions and a greater ratio of positive to negative interactions than couples in which only one partner is an alcoholic.
- ▶ Couples in which both spouses use alcohol heavily are less likely to divorce than those where one spouse uses alcohol heavily and the other does not.

It is likely that couples in which both spouses drink heavily may be more likely to drink together as a recreational activity, thus accounting for more positive interactions. Indeed, couples in which spouses drink similar amounts but do not drink together do not experience the same relationship benefits as couples in which spouses drink together.

But what about the kids?

It is important to note that these results speak to the consequences for alcohol use on the marriage. Although couples who drink heavily together experience fewer relationship problems than couples in which only one spouse drinks heavily, results are different for their children. Children experience worse outcomes when both their parents are heavy drinkers than when only one parent is.

Couples in which both spouses use alcohol heavily may experience greater rates of physical aggression, which can negatively affect children. When both spouses drink heavily or both spouses report greater alcohol dependence, couples report the most frequent husband-perpetrated physical aggression. Wife-perpetrated physical aggression is more frequent when either spouse is more dependent and is not reduced if both spouses are dependent.

Recent RIA research on marriage and drinking

The UB Research Institute on Addictions has conducted groundbreaking research on alcohol use and its consequences for more than 40 years. Recent findings include:

- ▶ When people drink with their partner (vs. apart from their partner) on a particular day, they experience more positive and less negative relationship functioning the next day. This is particularly true in cases when men believe that alcohol enhances social functioning or when women believe that alcohol increases intimacy in their relationship.¹
- ▶ Verbal aggression is up to two times more likely to occur if alcohol has been consumed in the previous four hours by either the perpetrator or the victim than if it has not, and physical aggression is three to four times more likely if alcohol has been consumed by the perpetrator and twice as likely if alcohol has been consumed by the victim.²
- ▶ Over the course of nine years, nearly 50 percent of couples with a discrepant drinking pattern (only one partner drinks heavily) divorced, whereas only 30 percent of couples who drank at similar amounts (neither or both partners were heavy drinkers) divorced in this time.³

¹ [Levitt, Derrick and Testa, 2014](#)

² [Testa and Derrick, 2014](#)

³ [Leonard, Smith and Homish, 2013](#)

If you think you or your partner has a problem:

- ▶ <http://www.buffalo.edu/ria/research/crc/resources.html>
- ▶ http://www.drugabuse.gov/sites/default/files/treatmentbrochure_web.pdf
- ▶ <http://www.aa.org/>
- ▶ <http://www.smartrecovery.org/intro/>
- ▶ <http://motivationandchange.com/outpatient-treatment/for-families/craft-overview/>

How Does Drinking Affect Cohabiting and Same-Sex Relationships? *continued*

is generally supplied either through the workplace or through one's spouse, so GLB people can have lower rates of insurance due to workplace discrimination or because they cannot access their partner's health care benefits in states that do not allow same-sex marriage. Some have suggested that having access to legal marriage, as is now the case in New York and several other states, will improve health outcomes (including alcohol and substance use) in the GLB population.

Despite the importance of examining how alcohol use affects the relationships of the GLB population, very little research has examined this issue. Gay male couples tend to experience higher rates of physical partner aggression than heterosexual married couples (research on lesbian couples is mixed), and alcohol is often involved. However, it is unclear whether the *association* between alcohol use and aggression is any stronger in gay male couples than in heterosexual married couples. There is virtually no research on how alcohol affects relationship satisfaction or the likelihood of separating in same-sex couples. This may prove to be a growing topic of interest in coming years as same-sex marriage rights increase.

