

The shifting patterns of alcohol use and mental health among young people

Introduction:

Mental health problems and alcohol use are closely linked. Alcohol intake can result in both mental and physical health problems and exacerbate social issues. Many people use alcohol to cope with their mental health and a wider Western culture promotes drinking as a form of stress relief (1,2). Additionally, longer-term alcohol drinking increases the risk of relational conflict, financial and employment prospects, and harmful risk behaviours which compounds mental health difficulties further. It is well recognised that excessive alcohol use can increase liver and heart disease, cancer, and stroke risk (2).

International Trends:

Interestingly, high resource countries including Australia show a general reduction in young people (aged 12-24 years) (3) drinking alcohol than generations before them (1,4). Explanations for the decline include shifting living and economic standards and advancing technologies (1). Younger people face growing uncertainty about their future, less secure employment prospects, and reduced access to housing and living at home longer (1,5). The rise in social media and internet use has increased awareness about the consequences of alcohol and social influence to limit consumption, particularly binge drinking (5). Greater parental engagement is an influential factor (5) and likely reflects the shifting patterns of living standards and access to online information and social influences.

Regardless of these changes, there are rising rates of mental health problems among young people, especially following the COVID-19 pandemic (6). The same factors reducing alcohol use are offered as reasons for increases in mental health problems including economic uncertainty, reduced finances, and increasing technology and social media exposure (7). There is limited evidence suggesting alcohol is being replaced by other illicit substances (5) or meaningfully influenced by government policies (5,8). At a general level, it seems links between alcohol use and mental health are changing.

The international trends disguise wide variation between and within countries (1). Epidemiological research shows that alcohol is disproportionately consumed by a subset of the population. For instance, findings from England show around a quarter of the heaviest drinkers consume three-quarters of the total alcohol consumed, with nearly one-third consumed by 4.4% of the population (9). Another factor worth considering is the reliance on self-report data when analysing trends as they remain susceptible to social desirability bias. Generally, findings indicate people under-report their alcohol use with around half of alcohol sales unaccounted for when compared with self-report data (10).

While the general trends of alcohol use appear promising, it is important not to overlook the shifting patterns on those using alcohol to cope. Changing alcohol use within the population risks isolating and stigmatising groups further. The rise in mental health among young people

still represents a risk factor for alcohol use. Poor mental health is shown to be a stronger predictor of alcohol use than alcohol leading to poorer mental health (11). Those caring and supporting young people, including health professionals, need to be mindful of the changing patterns and encourage open, safe, and non-judgemental conversations around mental health and alcohol use even though the general trends are encouraging.

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