

American Teens and Alcohol: The Reality. by David T. Feinberg (from the 2004 Annual Meeting presentation)

In America teenagers and alcohol have coexisted for a very long time. According to recent data, about half of high school seniors have had an alcoholic drink within the last 30 days. That means more than half of seventeen and eighteen year olds have had alcohol in the last month because we know that dropouts and truants use more drugs and alcohol than those who stay in school. By the time seniors graduate from high school there is over a 70% chance that they have experimented with alcohol. 45% of 12th graders do not disapprove of having 5 or more drinks once or twice each weekend. But alcohol use does not start with high school seniors. 70% of 8th graders think it would be "easy" or "fairly easy" to get some alcohol and one in five report having been "drunk". So it is safe to say that American teens use alcohol. There is actually evidence that teens who do not use drugs by the time they graduate from high school probably have some social skills problems and are less psychologically healthy than their using peers.

As drug use goes up, measures on psychological health go down. Alcohol use at the prom or at football games has become culturally acceptable. In essence, alcohol and drug use has become normative for teens in our country. This is not to say that alcohol is beneficial. It simply means that it is "normal" to use or experiment with alcohol and drugs during adolescence. However, alcohol is quite lethal for American teens. The leading causes of death for twelve to eighteen year olds, in order are: unintentional injury, homicide and suicide. Three out of four causes of death in the unintentional injury group are motor vehicle accidents in which alcohol plays a major role and probably is the leading single cause of death for sixteen to eighteen year olds.

Alcohol use can be classified into the following four categories:

1. No use means no use. This means reaching the age of majority (18 in most states) and never having tried alcohol, never having a sip of dad's beer, etc.

2. Use or experimentation, is commonly seen among teens. This group includes the widest variety of teenage drinkers. Abuse according to DSM-IV-TR occurs when alcohol use causes impairment in one of four areas. These four categories are role impairment (i.e. school), physically hazardous situations (i.e. drunk driving), legal (arrests), and interpersonal (arguments). In other words, alcohol

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abuse occurs when use of alcohol interferes with life.

3. Alcohol abuse is an unstable diagnosis; if you follow a teen over time its presence is very variable. A common example: male fraternity members. While living in the fraternity during college, many meet the criteria of alcohol abuse. Yet when these groups are followed for ten years, very few of those previously diagnosed as abusing still meet the criteria for abuse. Most move into the use category, some stop drinking altogether, but very few become alcohol dependent or alcoholics. Therefore, studying treatment interventions for abuse is difficult because the disorder may disappear as part of its natural course.

4. Alcohol dependence occurs when its use causes at least three of the following: tolerance; withdrawal; increasing usage over time; a persistent desire to cut down; spending a great deal of time getting or using; important social activities given up and persisting use despite knowledge of the problem.

In other words, alcohol dependence occurs when alcohol controls one's life. For a variety of reasons, even though teens drink quite often, very few actually develop alcohol dependence during their teen years. One reason is biologic. The adolescent liver is quite active and metabolizes alcohol efficiently. This makes tolerance and withdrawal unlikely. Also most teens' social milieu does not allow

them to "hit rock bottom" as adult alcoholics may. Most teens have parents, teachers, principals, coaches, and clinicians who step in and prevent dependence before it happens. Use and abuse are usually enough for caregivers to step in and force the teen into treatment.

Virtually all of the treatment literature concerning alcohol use disorders centers on alcohol dependence. Yet, as described above alcohol dependence is rare during adolescence. Additionally, the 12-step programs require turning oneself over to a higher power. Teenagers by definition are their own higher power. Another problem mentioned above, is that abuse is an unstable diagnosis. The real teen problem has to do with use. Yet this group itself is very heterogeneous. The teen who sips his dad's beer every few months is quite different from the one who has five beers every Friday night after the football game. As long as this binge drinker isn't driving, continues to do well in school, doesn't let his parents find out about it and doesn't get arrested, then he is still considered a user, not an abuser. The "five beers on Friday night teen" is in the same category as the teen who sips his parents champagne every New Year's Eve. Obviously, these are very different drinking profiles, but currently we have no accepted way to differentiate them. And the teen who never drinks, the "no use" teen, scores lower on measures of psychological health than those who use.

So maybe all these drinking teens are doing so because the developmental stage they are mastering is a difficult one. Although adolescence, often considered a tumultuous developmental period, yet 80% of teens manage the transition from childhood to adulthood quite well. Only one in five teens has a mental health issue needing treatment. Common ailments among those needing treatment are mood disorders, anxiety disorders, and disruptive behavior disorders. Alcohol use disorders remain relatively rare among teens.

So we are left with the reality that most teens in America deal with this developmental stage well. They drink alcohol and don't necessarily think binge drinking is harmful. Few develop alcohol abuse or dependence, although drinking is one of the leading causes of death for this age group.

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