



## NHMRC FAQ

Frequently Asked Questions About  
Alcohol and Marriage

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## Alcohol Use Disorders and Marriage

Currently in the United States, millions of adults suffer from alcohol use disorders. Alcohol use disorders include both alcohol abuse and alcohol dependence. Alcohol abuse is a problem pattern of drinking behavior that results in disruptions in work, school, and/or family life. This may include taking risks under the influence of alcohol that put the drinker or others at risk. Alcohol dependence includes any of the symptoms associated with alcohol abuse, but is more serious. Symptoms of alcohol dependence include cravings (a strong desire or need to drink), a loss of control, regularly drinking too much, and psychological and physical dependence that causes withdrawal symptoms such as nausea, sweating, or shaking when drinking is stopped.<sup>i,ii</sup> Many researchers have studied the effect of alcohol abuse on marriages. Among other outcomes, research shows that alcohol abuse increases the risk of divorce and violence and that it is related to lower marital satisfaction.<sup>iii</sup>

## Data on Alcohol Use Disorders in the United States

- More than seven percent of the U.S. population age 18 and older — nearly 14 million Americans — has an alcohol use disorder, including 8.1 million people who could be classified as alcohol dependant.<sup>iv</sup>
- Seventy-six million Americans, or about 43 percent of the U.S. adult population, have been exposed alcohol use disorders in their families.<sup>v</sup>

## Alcohol Use Disorders and Implications for Marriage

### Increased Risk of Divorce

- Alcohol problems are related to increased rates of marital violence, poor communication, and feelings of marital distress that lead to a greater risk of divorce.<sup>vi</sup>
- Differences between spouses in their drinking behaviors decrease marital quality and increase the likelihood of divorce. One reason for this increased likelihood is that drinking has an impact on the amount of time that partners spend together, especially if the spouse with the alcohol use disorder frequently drinks away from home. The more time spent apart, the less satisfied the spouse without the drinking problem becomes, and the greater the potential for divorce.<sup>vii</sup>

### Decreased Marital Satisfaction

- *Marital distress.* Alcohol use disorders increase the feelings of marital distress. Individuals in marriages in which one or both spouses has an alcohol use disorder report higher levels of marital distress or trouble than do married individuals whose spouses do not have drinking problems.<sup>viii</sup>
- *Anger.* Marital satisfaction is related strongly to a couple's ability to communicate effectively. But heavy

alcohol use is associated with more negative and hostile communication, more expressions of anger, and less warmth and unity in the relationship. These factors decrease a couple's satisfaction in their marriage and create greater tension.<sup>ix,x</sup>

- *Everyday family responsibilities.* Alcohol use disorders decrease marital satisfaction as they decrease the drinking spouse's ability to participate in everyday household tasks and responsibilities. This inability leads to greater stress on the nondrinking spouse and decreases satisfaction in the marriage.<sup>xi</sup>
- *Psychological distress.* Alcohol use disorders increase the psychological distress of the nondrinking spouse. An adult's alcohol abuse also is related to children's increased social, emotional, behavioral, and academic problems, which, in turn, is associated with more stress in the family and less marital satisfaction.<sup>xii</sup>

### **Increased Difficulty Communicating**

- *Damaging communication.* Spouses with alcohol use disorders tend to use more negative and damaging communication (e.g., criticizing, blaming, contempt), express more anger, and show lower levels of warmth when trying to solve a problem than do spouses who do not have an alcohol use disorder. This kind of negative communication discourages the use of positive problem solving skills such as open discussion and encouragement.<sup>xiii,xivxv</sup>
- *Less problem solving.* Couples in which one partner has an alcohol use disorder engage in problem solving less often than do other couples. Partners in such marriages may lose the desire to engage in problem solving and give up when alcohol is involved because they anticipate that the conversation will soon become negative. As this pattern continues, important issues such as family finances, sexual intimacy, and childrearing decisions go unresolved because it is easier to avoid communicating than it is to deal with the stress and negative emotions that are associated with alcohol-related communication problems.<sup>xvi,xvixviii</sup>
- *Personality characteristics.* Personality characteristics common among people with alcohol use disorders also can affect communication. People with alcohol use disorders tend to be less conscientious, less agreeable, more anxious, and hypersensitive than are non-drinkers. These personality characteristics make effective communication and problem solving more difficult.<sup>xix</sup>
- *Effects on the brain.* Researchers believe that alcohol's effect on the brain may contribute to the increase in the negative communication. Alcohol appears to impair a person's ability to understand and properly interpret what a spouse is saying. Individuals with an alcohol use disorder tend to interpret things their partners say in negative ways, leading them to respond with greater anger and negative emotions.<sup>xx,xxi</sup>

### **Increased Potential for Marital Violence**

- Alcohol use disorders are frequently related to marital violence:
  - Among battered women, 40-60 percent reported that their husbands were heavy or problem drinkers.<sup>xxii</sup>
  - Among married men admitted to alcohol treatment centers, 50-70 percent reported participating in partner violence, with 20-30 percent of these men reporting having engaged in severe violence towards their spouses.<sup>xxiii</sup>

- The more frequently men are intoxicated, the more likely they are to be verbally and physically violent toward their spouses. Alcohol use disorders are associated with increased aggression and severe marital violence, likely to result in injury.<sup>xxiv</sup>
- Spouses under the influence of alcohol tend to act more aggressively. Alcohol tends to make individuals more impulsive and less able to restrain their aggression. This pattern is particularly evident amongst individuals who display aggressive personality traits while sober. <sup>xxv</sup>

### **Potential Effects on Sexual Intimacy**

- Alcohol use disorders are related to sexual problems, such as lower sexual satisfaction and erectile dysfunction among men. For women, alcohol abuse may impede orgasm.<sup>xxvi</sup>

### **Therapy for Couples Struggling with Alcohol Use Disorders**

- Alcohol use disorders are not simply an individual problem. Families often play a significant role in the “cause” and “cure” of alcohol use disorders. For this reason, research shows that therapy that involves the spouse and possibly other family members is more helpful to overcoming alcoholism, than is only treating the individual who has the alcohol problem.<sup>xxvii, xxviii, xxixxxx</sup>

- <sup>i</sup> Stanton, M.D. (On-line). AAMFT Consumer Update: Alcohol Problems. Alexandria, VA: American Association of Marital and Family Therapy. Retrieved June, 6, 2006 from: [http://www.aamft.org/families/Consumer\\_Updates/Alcohol.asp](http://www.aamft.org/families/Consumer_Updates/Alcohol.asp)
- <sup>ii</sup> National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (On-line). FAQs for the General Public. Retrieved June, 6, 2006 from: <http://www.niaaa.nih.gov/FAQs/General-English/default.htm>.
- <sup>iii</sup> Fals-Stewart, W. (On-line). AAMFT Consumer Update: Substance Abuse and Intimate Relationships. Alexandria, VA: Association of Marital and Family Therapy. Retrieved June, 6, 2006 from: [http://www.aamft.org/families/Consumer\\_Updates/SubstanceAbuseandIntimateRelationships.asp](http://www.aamft.org/families/Consumer_Updates/SubstanceAbuseandIntimateRelationships.asp).
- <sup>iv</sup> Fals-Stewart, W., O'Farrell, T., Birchler, G., Cordova, J., & Kelley, M. (2005). Behavioral couples therapy for alcoholism and drug abuse: Where we've been, where we are, and where we're going. *Journal of Cognitive Psychotherapy: An International Quarterly*, 19, 239-246.
- <sup>v</sup> Osterman, J., Sloan, F., & Taylor, D. (2005). Heavy alcohol use and marital dissolution in the USA. *Social Science and Medicine*, 61, 2304-2316.
- <sup>vi</sup> Leonard, K., & Mudar, P. (2003). Peer and partner drinking and the transition to marriage: A longitudinal examination of selection and influence processes. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, 17, 115-125.
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- <sup>viii</sup> Johnson, P. (2002). Predictors of family functioning within alcoholic families. *Contemporary Family Therapy*, 24, 371-384.

- <sup>ix</sup> Jacob, T., Leonard, K., & Haber, J. (2001). Family interactions of alcoholics as related to alcoholism type and drinking condition. *Alcoholism: Clinical and Experimental Research*, 25, 835-843
- <sup>x</sup> Jennison, K., & Johnson, K. (2001). Parental alcoholism as a risk factor for DSM-IV-defined alcohol abuse and dependence in American women: The protective benefits of dyadic cohesion in marital communication. *Journal of Drug Abuse*, 27, 349-374.
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- <sup>xii</sup> Fals-Stewart, W., O'Farrell, T., Birchler, G., Cordova, J., & Kelley, M. (2005). Behavioral couples therapy for alcoholism and drug abuse: Where we've been, where we are, and where we're going. *Journal of Cognitive Psychotherapy: An International Quarterly*, 19, 239-246.
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- <sup>xiv</sup> Murphy, C., Winters, J., O'Farrell, T., Fals-Stewart, W., & Murphy, M. (2005). Alcohol consumption and intimate partner violence by alcoholic men: Comparing violent and nonviolent conflicts. *Psychology of Addictive Behaviors*, 19, 19-35.
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