

Thoughts on Alcohol

Alcohol on Our Minds

Some college kids are off on Spring break now, and high school seniors are starting to get itchy about their own up-coming college experience. Some are even off on the high school equivalent of the spring break trip. Bacchanalian partying seems to go hand in hand with many of these spring rituals. Most of us know that binge drinking is rampant on college campuses. We also know it happens on some local golf courses, in backyards and Westchester basements—Spring Break or not. Parents continue to wonder what they should be saying or doing to fulfill their parental duties in these situations.

Over the past several months, I had the pleasure of visiting more than a dozen colleges with my children and was interested in the many ways campuses are trying to address this problematic issue. There is very little data yet on which programs work and how best to communicate to adolescents and young adults about dangerous drinking behaviors. However, since the last time I made these rounds to colleges, I think something has changed. College administrators are no longer looking the other way. It seems they no longer pretend that there isn't a problem and some seem to be more proactive.

One college policy is “no hard liquor on campus” which our perky tour guide told us is fairly well observed by the student body. Such a rule effectively recognizes the difficulty of policing underage alcohol consumption while it also tries to reduce harm from the most dangerous behaviors, habits and traditions involving bingeing on hard liquor.

A March 2006 article in the Journal of American College Health reviews a survey conducted at West Virginia University where students were administered the AUDIT (Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test) questionnaire when they presented to the Student Health Service. This questionnaire was developed by the World Health Organization to try to identify people at particular risk for abusive and problematic alcohol use. Research has shown that screening like this followed by brief intervention can reduce the frequency and quantity of drinking. Through a technique called motivational interviewing, doctors, school personnel, emergency room workers, and others can quickly assess and even encourage a student's desire to change his or her behavior.

It is worth commenting on some of the results of the survey in this study. Although the number of students interviewed was small (245), fully 60% (129) of them screened positive on the AUDIT and were found at risk for alcohol problems. Of this group, 52% said they had binged three or more times in the last 2 weeks. (A binge is defined as 5 or more drinks for a male, or 4 or more for a woman within a period of two hours). Read that again. Put slightly differently, over half of those at risk according to the screening tool had binged three or more times in the previous two weeks.

Reprinted below is the AUDIT test. Scores can range from 0 to 40. A score greater than or equal to 6 is considered a positive test for alcohol problems. These problems include injuries, crime, sexual assault, disruption of the lives of others and impact on the environment and the community. They also may be predictors of people who risk going on to become alcoholics and dangerous drinkers.

**“AUDIT”
Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test**

- | | | | | | |
|------------------|--|--------------------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1 or 2 (0) | 1. In the past year, when you drink alcohol, how many do you usually drink? | 3 or 4 (1) | 5 or 6 (2) | 7 to 9 (3) | 10 or more (4) |
| < Monthly (0) | 2. How often do you drink that amount? | 2-4 times/month (1) | 2-3 times/week (2) | > 4 times/week (3) (4) | |
| Never (0) | 3. How often in the past year have you had 5 (male)/ 4 (female) or more drinks on 1 occasion? | <Monthly (1) | Monthly (2) | Weekly (3) | Daily/almost daily (4) |
| Never (0) | 4. How often during the past year have you found that you couldn't stop drinking once you had started? | <Monthly (1) | Monthly (2) | Weekly (3) | Daily/almost daily (4) |
| Never (0) | 5. How often during the past year have you missed something important because of drinking? For example, have you ever missed school, class, or other activities? | <Monthly (1) | Monthly (2) | Weekly (3) | Daily/almost daily (4) |
| Never (0) | 6. How often during the past year have you needed a first drink in the morning to get yourself going after a heavy drinking session? | <Monthly (1) | Monthly (2) | Weekly (3) | Daily/almost daily (4) |
| Never (0) | 7. How often during the past year have you felt bad" or "felt guilty" after drinking? | <Monthly (1) | Monthly (2) | Weekly (3) | Daily/almost daily (4) |
| Never (0) | 8. How often during the past year have you been unable to remember what happened the night before because you had been drinking? | <Monthly (1) | Monthly (2) | Weekly (3) | Daily/almost daily (4) |
| Never (0) | 9. Has your drinking contributed to an injury to yourself or anyone else? | Yes, but not in the last year (2) | | Yes, during the last year (4) | |
| Never (0) | 10. Has a relative, friend, doctor, or other health worker been concerned about your drinking or suggested that you should cut down? | Yes, but not in the last year (2) | | Yes, during the last year (4) | |

Note: Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT) scores range from 0 to 40. In this study, Scores ≥ 6 are considered a positive screening result for alcohol problems.

Looking at this questionnaire may be a helpful way for families to begin to frame the conversation about what constitutes problem drinking or drinking habits that may put young people at risk for lifelong problematic drinking.

Armed with the knowledge that screening and intervening may have some beneficial impact, students, parents, administrators, faculty and health care personnel have tools to use to begin to make a difference. Even without training in motivational interviewing, the next logical step in the process, a self assessment can have an impact.

- **If you are an adult, take the AUDIT yourself and begin to evaluate your own behavior.**
- **If you are a student, take the AUDIT and think about the next frat or golf course party.**
- **If you are an educator or health care worker, take the AUDIT and begin to incorporate its questions into your interviewing at work.**

Together, we can begin to raise consciousness about how extreme, dangerous, and rampant the contemporary drinking habits really are.