

WHAT MADE RACHEL DRINK

Individual Determinants of Binge Drinking and What We Can Do to Stop It

A Pumphrey Law Scholarship Essay by Evan Mizerak

Prompt: *How are binge drinking and ego a dangerous combination? How can we as a society raise awareness and work to prevent binge drinking? (800 - 1,000 words)*

NOTE: The individuals mentioned in this essay are real. Names have been changed to ensure privacy.

Ever since Bryan could remember, his mom, Rachel, had struggled with a drinking problem.

He hated using the *A-word*, because it wasn't always destructive. In fact, a period of time went by during which she pretty much kept it in check. But there are still bad days - he always calls home before bringing friends over for fear that she will be sprawled about the home in a drunken stupor, and he refuses to go to sleep until she drives home safely from any night out. Rachel grew up in an affluent, tidy household with two parents at home.

But my other friend, Sam, has a father that grew up in vastly different circumstances. In a single-parent household that was often short on change, Sam's dad found himself struggling to keep up in school with no money to fund a tutor. Sam's dad has never touched alcohol in his life.

So what made Rachel drink?

Let's dig a bit deeper: after all, there has to be *some* reason that the ultimate relationships with alcohol exhibited by these two adults are incongruous with their socioeconomic backgrounds. The fact of the matter is that there are near-innumerable factors that culminate in each individual's likelihood to binge drink, the vast majority of which are largely esoteric and difficult to quantify. Ego is definitely one of them - the most precarious type of dependence on alcohol is one in which the individual in question feels as though he/she is immune to the inherent control and influence exerted by what they are drinking. There are certain situations in life during which confidence is key, but excessive self-assuredness can be hazardous in scenarios that involve life-threatening consequences. In order to avoid the pitfalls of excessive alcohol consumption, a significant degree of caution is necessary.

But ego is ultimately only the tip of the iceberg, and if we are to truly raise awareness of the prevalence of binge drinking as a society, it is imperative that we understand the myriad factors that contribute to alcohol dependence. The International Center for Alcohol Policies (ICAP) has recently allocated significant attention to both biological and social determinants that prompt binge drinking and other alcohol abuse disorders. The reality is that seeds for alcohol abuse are sown as early as in genetic markers.¹ Being that genes are implicated in both alcohol metabolism and variation in physiological responses to drinking, much of susceptibility to dependence is determined before birth. In fact, a study of adopted children demonstrated that 18.27% of those whose parents struggled with alcohol dependence experienced similar difficulties, compared to a mere 6% in those whose parents experienced no struggle with alcohol.² Evidently, the impact of abuse disorders spans numerous generations.

Of course, susceptibility is quite malleable once an individual is born, as well. Variable personality traits such as aggression, irritability, and history of depression factor into the likelihood that one will become a binge drinker. There have even been mathematical algorithms presented that postulate a holistic interconnection between many facets of a personality profile and an individual's ultimate likelihood to fall victim to alcohol dependence.³ Some factors, however, have shown inconsistency in predicting alcohol dependence. For example, the age at which one begins to drink alcoholic beverages can promote the development of an unhealthy relationship with the substance, but at the same time, countries in which the legal drinking age is substantially lower than 21 (such as France, Germany, and China) exhibit far lower percentages of road deaths that involve alcohol.⁴ Environments within the home of a youth, conversely, have proven to be consistently impactful. Family dysfunction and abusive parental treatment are both reliable precursors for alcohol consumption, as is financial status. While many countries find that rates of alcoholism skyrocket among the homeless population, some researchers posit that the wealthy are just as likely to drink to excess.⁵

The bottom line, of course, is that there is no *quintessential profile* of a binge drinker. To raise awareness of its pernicious character, we have to understand that one's decision to drink to excess arises from an amalgamation of genetic, individual, socioeconomic, and environmental factors. This may shed some light on what made Rachel drink: sure, her childhood home was superficially flawless, but both of her parents drank heavily, which cultivated a cumulative anxiety and coldness within the family. Although Sam's grandmother was comparatively poor, his father's household lacked the resources to indulge in alcohol, and he and his mother were a remarkably tightly-knit pair.

Such an unpredictable disease may seem nearly impossible to prevent prophylactically, but regardless of predisposition, we as a society can work to prevent binge drinking. Live speakers would undoubtedly be beneficial to young people learning about the dangers of alcohol abuse - it is one thing to hear a list of statistics, but it is another entirely to be exposed to the story of an individual who can attest to the dangers of binge drinking. Beyond education, which is always a worthwhile first step, institutions of higher education including Dartmouth College and the University of Vermont are taking collaborative steps to spearhead initiatives meant to reduce binge drinking in students.⁶ Furthermore, I would suggest enforcing considerable restrictions on alcohol marketing - media, including commercials, is ubiquitous in 2018, and we as a society need to stop glamorizing and normalizing heavy drinking. Finally, the nature of disciplinary action in response to alcohol violations should be tailored to *aid* offenders, not just punish them. Part of all discipline for alcohol-related infractions should be behavioral rehabilitation; habits don't change without formal correction, and we are doing a disservice to society if we simply fine those who struggle with alcohol dependence as opposed to using the resources at our disposal to change their flawed mindsets.

A restructured societal approach to the prevention of binge drinking will take steps toward demystifying its causes and addressing its effects. If one thing has become clear, it is that there is no individual who is immune to addiction.

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