

Further reasons why alcohol and stress don't-and shouldn't-mix

Opinion

Most adults of this generation are very familiar with stress, having experienced it ourselves at some point or watching others go through it. Stress is felt when we go through enormous physical, mental or emotional pressure, leading us to feel tired, drained and spent. Little wonder that some choose to go the easy route and have a temporary 'fix' to their problems-alcohol.

A number of studies have been made regarding the link between alcohol and stress. In a previous post we have already talked about how they 'feed' off each other. In this post we're going to break down the academic lingo-from studies talking about how alcohol affects the functioning of the body's main stress hormone and why this isn't a good thing-into plain and simple terms.

Our body's response to stress

When a person drinks alcohol to as an attempt to relieve stress, it results to a "therapeutic" effect which encourages him or her to drink more. Generally, the heavier the problem, the more bottles or shots drank. Left unchecked, this can easily lead to alcohol dependence, and that is where the problem grows. I say "grows" because alcohol can easily cause problems even if you're only drinking it for a night—just ask anyone who's ever been involved in an alcohol-influenced fistfight, danced topless at a bar or wrote posts in their social media accounts that made them the butt of jokes in the morning, lose a girlfriend/boyfriend or worse, a job.

Did you know that grain alcohol or ethanol, the ingredient in alcoholic drinks that gives its potency can fuel cars? Of course this is toxic to your body, unless you're Optimus Prime. Toxins from alcohol eventually damage many organ systems over time. In the endocrine system, damage shows in the way alcohol impairs our body's natural capacity to lower levels of its main stress hormone-cortisol.

Cortisol plays a huge role to an increase in supply of glucose (our main source of energy), increased heart and respiration rates, increased blood flow and a boost in the body's capability to heal any damaged tissues. The body produces high levels of cortisols to help an individual cope with any stressful situation. A short-lived rise in cortisols is important for survival, but once the stressor has been dealt with, the body has to go back to its normal state.

The effects of constant high cortisols levels

What happens if the signal to produce high amounts of this hormone cannot be turned 'off', which is one of the effects of alcoholism? A 2010 study in the journal *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research* found that elevated cortisol in alcoholics can lead to hampering basic mental activities such as making decisions, focusing attention properly or effectively making new memories or recalling old ones.

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Elevated cortisol levels in alcoholics also encourage the onset of pseudo-Cushing syndrome, whose symptoms include upper body obesity, weakened bones which can make common activities-such as lifting, bending or rising from a seated position seem like you've been working on the docks without a forklift—result to backaches and fractures in the rib and spinal column, severe fatigue, high blood pressure and sugar, and depression. Beer belly, it seems, may be the least of an alcoholic's health woes.

In fact, according to another 2010 review by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, recovering alcoholics with pseudo-Cushing's experience symptoms that are worse than during the period of heavy drinking itself.

But wait, there's more. Another study in the same journal found that cortisol levels still remained high even in recovering alcoholics who are already going through the initial stages of alcohol withdrawal. Researchers in the study also felt that the lingering effects of elevated cortisol seriously increase an abstinent chance of a relapse.

It's a disastrous loop, according to a 2010 study by researchers from Texas Tech University and Penn State University. Their findings say that stress that is not addressed is a major reason for a person's inability to control alcohol cravings. In turn, a decreased ability to fight cravings leads to eventually reuniting with the bottle.

While the effects of pseudo-Cushing's may be reversed with due treatment, wouldn't it be better if we just avoided all these complications in the first place by taking on whatever's stressing you by the horns, instead of looking for a temporary solution that is going to be the cause of more problems later on?

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Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.