Research Explains Why People Get Drunk at the Office Party

Posted on Monday 19th September 2011

Getting drunk at the office party and behaving in an inappropriate way may be down to the fact that drinking alcohol in an unfamiliar environment can lead to an inability to reign in unsuitable behaviour, according to research by psychologists at the University of Birmingham published online in the journal Alcohol and Alcoholism.

The researchers have discovered that drinking alcohol in a context that is unknown can lead people to behave in a more disinhibited way than if they had been drinking in a familiar environment.

When drinking in familiar environments it is possible to learn a 'conditioned compensatory response' to alcohol. This means that over time there would be reduction in the disinhibitory effects of alcohol because the drinker is learning to anticipate the effects of the alcohol in that context.

Dr Suzanne Higgs (http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/psychology/people/profile.aspx?ReferenceId=10174), lead investigator from the School of Psychology, said, 'It is possible to acquire a conditioned compensatory response to the effects of alcohol through a process of learning if we regularly drink it in a familiar environment.

'We wanted to know if we gave the participants alcoholic drinks several times in a context in which they had never been drinking before, whether they would learn the compensatory response. We then wanted to find out if we gave them an alcoholic drink in a different context whether the participants would behave in a more disinhibited way.'

Participants in the study were asked to take part in two phases of research – firstly a 'learning' phase and then a test phase.

First of all, in the learning phase, the participants were given alcohol in one room and then the placebo (non-alcoholic) drink in another room. For the test phase the participants were given a completely new alcoholic drink. One group drank the new alcoholic beverage in the room in which they had previously drunk alcohol in the learning phase. The other group drank the new drink in the room in which they had drunk the placebo drink. During the test the participants had to perform a simple computer task where they were asked to respond when particular cues came up on the screen, in this case positive words, or to withhold responding when a different set of cues appear - negative words.

Even though the two groups had drunk the same alcohol in the same doses, the group that drank it in the context in which they had not drunk alcohol before were much more disinhibited. Dr Higgs explained, 'We found that those who drank the alcoholic drink in the context in which they weren't used to drinking it had not learned the compensatory response, and were much less able to inhibit their responses to the computer screen cues and were more intoxicated in terms of their behaviour than those who drank the alcohol in the familiar environment.

She continues: 'The implications for drinking in a real life situation are that if you have an alcoholic drink somewhere new, for example, at the office party or in some other environment that you don't associate with alcohol you may experience more of these effects of disinhibition because you lack the conditioned compensatory response that you would experience in your usual drinking environment.'

Ends

Notes to Editors
The research is published in Alcohol and Alcoholism.

For further information
Kate Chapple, Press Officer, University of Birmingham, tel 0121 414 2772 or 07789 921164.

© University of Birmingham 2015