

Why people may be more likely to drink when they're happy than when they're sad

June 22 2023, by Robin Bailey and Adrian Wells



Contrary to popular belief, we may actually be more likely to drink in excess when we're happy. Credit: Lomb/ Shutterstock

There's a long-held belief that people drink alcohol in excess to drown their sorrows. But [recent research](#) into mood and drinking has found the opposite is also true.

Using data from 69 studies (12,394 people in total) in the US, Canada, France and Australia, all of which employed surveys to assess [mood](#) and

drinking levels, the researchers found no evidence that people drank more on days when they felt down. Rather surprisingly, however, people tended to drink—and drink heavily—on days when they were in a good mood.

The authors found that participants were between 6% and 28% more likely to drink on days they were in a good mood, and 17%-23% more likely to [binge drink](#) (having more than four or five drinks within a few hours) on these days.

These findings suggest that, contrary to popular belief, we may actually be more likely to drink in excess when we're happy than when we're feeling down. So, what explains this phenomenon? In [our research](#), we have identified several possible factors.

'Desire thinking'

Drinking is associated with a [thought process](#) called "[desire thinking](#)". This is a way of thinking that's geared towards anticipating [positive outcomes](#) from certain experiences, based on the associations we have with that experience.

Before we drink, we tend to have an expectation of it based on [past experiences](#)—such as how the alcohol will taste, the feeling of being intoxicated, or the idea that alcohol will make us more interesting. We may also have [positive memories](#) from other times we drank. If so, the next time we think about having a drink, we may immediately default to thinking of it in a positive light.

This can then lead to "[prolonged self-talk](#)", where we remind ourselves of the reasons for drinking—such as because you did well at work, or because the weather's nice. Both this and desire thinking can combine to maintain [positive mood](#) and expectations—intensifying the cravings for

alcohol.

Adding another layer of positivity to the mix, our research has also found that people tend to hold what we call positive "[meta-cognitive beliefs](#)" regarding the usefulness of desire thinking.

In other words, when desire thinking makes us crave alcohol by reminding us of all the good things that come with drinking, we're likely to trust that positive thought and see it as a good thing. Thinking positively about the positive experiences we're about to have may increase our motivation to drink more.

The downside to this potent cocktail of positive thoughts and feelings is that it appears to be incredibly hard to control and resist. For example, there's evidence that positive beliefs can make us feel like we're [less in control of our thinking and behavior](#).

Taking control

In our [clinical research](#) with [addiction](#) and various [other mental health conditions](#), we have found that being able to control the way we think about things—whether that thinking is positive or negative—is key to behavioral change and a balanced state of mind.

However, to take control of the way you think about something, you first need to become aware of your extended thought patterns. The better you become at "thinking about your thinking", the easier it is to control both your positive and [negative thoughts](#).

Let's say this thought pops into your mind: "I am feeling good—I deserve to drink this weekend." Instead of thinking more about this, choose to leave the thought alone—a technique called "[detached mindfulness](#)". It's also worth reminding yourself that it's difficult to [stop](#)

[craving something](#) if you think about it a lot.

Try to think of the positive and negative thoughts you have as similar to receiving a [text message](#). We don't always have control over whether the message we receive is good or bad, but we do have complete control over whether we choose to respond to it or not. This will help to show you that you have control over your desire thinking—and therefore your [drinking](#) choices.

Positive mood has also been implicated in other addictive behaviors, such as [nicotine use](#), [gambling](#), and [internet pornography addiction](#). This tells us that positive mood may not be the pathway to a healthy body and mind, as we might believe.

Instead, what may be important is the ability to be flexible in the way we think and behave around positive and negative moods—and in particular, knowing that we can always make choices in how we behave, regardless of our patterns of thinking.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Why people may be more likely to drink when they're happy than when they're sad (2023, June 22) retrieved 15 July 2023 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-06-people-theyre-happy-sad.html>

<p>This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.</p>
--