

F O C U S

VISTA PSYCHOLOGICAL & COUNSELING CENTRE

Any amount of alcohol can harm the brain, study

Any amount of alcohol can cause damage to the brain, and more so than previously realized, according to a study in what researchers call one of the largest of its kind to date. The preliminary findings from Oxford University were recently posted to *medRxiv* ahead of peer review, drawing on clinical data and imaging samples from over 25,000 adults in the U.K. Biobank study. Subjects were aged 40 to 69 years when they were first recruited from 2006 to 2010. Nearly all participants were classified as current drinkers, while just 5.2% were non-drinkers, per the study. Almost half of participants were consuming alcohol at levels above U.K. 'low risk' guidelines, though few were considered heavy drinkers, researchers wrote. Through MRI analysis, the team looked for correlations between alcohol use and grey matter in the brain. "No safe dose of alcohol for the brain was found. Moderate consumption is associated with more widespread adverse effects on the brain than previously recognized," the study reads. "Individuals who binge drink or with high blood pressure

TIPS TO DIFUSE A MELTDOWN

Shifting your thinking and practicing deep breathing can help when you're stuck in an intense emotional moment.

At some point, we've all gotten stuck in a "meltdown" moment—an overwhelming feeling of anger or stress that was difficult to shake off. "Feeling overwhelmed makes it harder to identify ways to get unstuck; the options seem limited which ca create a sense of hopelessness or despair. Additionally, negative memories may come to mind more readily, and we may filter out useful ways of viewing the situation at hand," says Abby Altman, an associate psychologist at Harvard-affiliated Brigham and Womens's Hospital. But there are ways to shift your focus and break out of extremely emotional moments. Take note of the following tips so you can put them to work if a meltdown strikes. **Shift your thinking.** Altman says before and during intense reactive moments, we tend to use a lot of "I feel" language. You might hear someone say "I feel like there's no hope" or "I feel like no one cares about me." "Although we are saying 'I feel,' these statements are actually thoughts and not felling," Altman points out. "By identifying the thoughts, we can identify patterns in our thinking and shift them." Altman offers this ABCDE method to help. **A. Attention.** When you feel distressed, stop what you're doing and pay attention to your inner dialogue. What is your mind telling you? **B. Belief.** Think about what you believe has happened. Automatically believing your thoughts may not give you an accurate picture of the situation at hand. **C. Challenge.** Broaden your focus by challenging your thoughts. Are they facts or opinion? What is the bigger picture/ what might you think if you were feeling calmer? **D. Discount.** Acknowledge that your emotions have been dominating your thinking and that those emotions and associated sensations will eventually end. Let the unhelpful thoughts go. **E. Explore the options.** Instead of engaging in less helpful behaviors because of this feeling, what else can you do? **Shift your physical response.** Feeling overwhelmed often triggers the fight-or-flight response—the body's reaction to perceived threats. The b body releases a flood

(Alcohol study continued from cover page)

and BMI may be more susceptible. Detrimental effects of drinking appear to be greater than other modifiable factors. Current 'low risk' drinking guidelines should be revisited to take account of brain effects." Perhaps the findings aren't surprising, study authors said, due to the mechanism in which ethanol diffuses throughout brain tissue. The more alcohol participants consumed each week, the lower the grey matter density across the brain, researchers found, blaming alcohol for an 0.8% "grey matter volume variance," which albeit "a small effect size," was a larger contributing factor than other tested risk factors, like smoking. Further, the type of beverage (wine, beer or spirits) all seemed to inflict the same degree of harm; "We found no evidence that risk of alcohol-related brain harm differs according to alcoholic beverage type," study authors wrote. Researchers credited the large sample size in offering strong statistical evidence to reveal previously uncharacterized associations across different areas in the brain, as well as connections to drinking patterns. The study had its limitations, like a potentially unrepresentative sample; subjects were "healthier, better educated, less deprived with less ethnic diversity than the general population," authors wrote. There are still some unknowns, like the duration of drinking necessary to lend an effect on the brain. Researchers suggested certain life periods, like teenage years and older age, when the brain undergoes significant change, could increase vulnerability.

Source: Kayla Rivas, Health Reporter, Fox News. April 2020.

(Tips to Defuse a Meltdown continued from cover page)

of stress hormones, causing a cascade of physiological changes to prepare you to jump out of the way of danger. For example, your heart beats faster your breath quickens to get more oxygen into your blood, and your blood pressure rises to push that blood to your brain and muscles. This reactive state can affect our ability to think clearly and work through the problem, Altman notes. "It becomes almost impossible to examine our thinking and to calm our reactions intended to keep us safe. It also makes it hard to imagine a calmer time and to think that our emotional state will eventually settle down." Altman says one way to break this response is to take deep, slow, rhythmic breaths to calm the body and trigger the relaxation response—the opposite of the fight-or-flight response. "Focus on breathing through your stomach, so that your belly rises when you inhale and drops when you exhale," she advises. "Consider inhaling gently and slowly through your nose to a count of four, expanding your belly as you do. Hold that breath for a count of two before slowly exhaling through your mouth to a count of six." **Helping someone else.** If you're with someone having a meltdown, you may be tempted to problem-solve or encourage the person to calm down. But it's more helpful to use these approaches:

- Use words that reflect what you're noticing. "Saying to people that you can see they are angry or upset can validate the person's experience while helping them pause and take notice," says Altman.
- Ask questions about what the person thinks has happened. "This often helps someone reflect on the experience," Altman says. "When some details are clarified, they may see more options and choices and become less blinded by a sense of despair."
- Remind the person of previous success in difficult situations. "This will help affirm their ability to manage the current situation," Altman says.

Getting more help. If you experience frequent meltdowns, talk to your primary care doctor. Stress has a harmful impact on health: it can raise your blood sugar blood pressure, and it can cause insomnia, anxiety, or depression. If an underlying cause is triggering stress, such as sleep deprivation, it's all the more important to seek medical care. The sooner you learn effective ways to cope, the sooner you'll feel better.

Source: Harvard Health Publishing, Harvard Medical School, September 2020.

Nine Tips to Help Improve Your Motivation to Exercise

Finding the motivation to start exercising can be hard, and finding the motivation to keep exercising can be even harder. Whether you're having to work around a tight schedule of work and family commitments, feel self-conscious, or just can't face the idea of pushing yourself physically, there are many factors that make exercise seem beyond you. To help you change your mindset around moving, we enlisted the help of sport psychologist Professor Andy Lane for some advice on exercise motivation. Lane is working with fitness app Strava and its new 1% Better challenge, which involves exercising for 15 minutes a day, five days a week, for four weeks. **Start Small.** If you haven't been exercising much, there can be a sense of lethargy. The challenges of starting again will seem harder and demotivating. The route around that is to say, "I'm just going to get out for 15 minutes. I'm going to walk the first eight minutes, and then I'm going to walk back the next eight minutes, or I'm going to start running." The idea of walking for eight minutes isn't daunting—you know you will do that. **Don't Focus On Big Goals Straight Away.** At the start, you can demotivate yourself with goals. By all means set a big aspirational goal, but don't look at it. Keep your mind in the here and now and take it one step at a time. Start out just by going for some exercise. Make it simple. **Prepare When You're Motivated.** Accept it's a challenge to exercise and give it enough respect and don't make the challenge harder by having to ask, "Where are my shoes? Where is my running gear?" Do all that preparation beforehand when you're motivated, so at the point when you're feeling vulnerable, all those decisions are easy. **Motivation Will Come Once You Start.** Your motivation when sitting down and not warmed up is different to when you get moving. Your mind changes. Anyone who exercises will know that if you do eight minutes of walking, you'll turn around and you'll run home. Let motivation come from within the exercise. When people say they've lost their running mojo, my response is, "You've left it under a bench about a mile into your run." **It Doesn't Have to Be Brutal.** If you're finding it so hard, and you're wondering if running ever becomes easy the answer is yes! You're setting off too fast—slow it down. Exercise does not have to be brutal to be beneficial. Look at your route—is it full of hills? Is 30 minutes achievable? Are you thinking you don't want to walk? Why ever not? That's an attitude which can lead to you feeling negative. Slow it down, walk, or

even find a route with traffic lights so there are natural breaks. **Connect with Others.** It helps to do things with people. It's hard at the moment, but it's not hard to connect to other people virtually through things like Strava (app). From a beginner's point of view, it helps to get positive reinforcement. The chances that you'll stop after three weeks are reduced when people are saying "well done" each time. People might also run with you, which helps normalize a slower pace. Running completely on your own is challenging, so actively seek that support. **Think About Your Lifestyle.** If you go out and have a gallon of lager, going for a long run the next day is simply not happening. You don't have to have a monastery-type life, but your diet is hugely influential on your mindset and sleep is important for our recovery. If you have a big night out, maybe the next day just take a walk.

Negotiate the Time You Need With Your Family. If you have a family, the adults should give each other the green light to go and exercise and not feel guilty. In fact, where possible, try and bring the family along with you. It's much better than both of you sitting at home feeling miserable. **It's Not Just About Fitness.** Try to make exercise not just about fitness goals, but to make you feel better, more positive and happier at the end of it. Put music or a good podcast on. Pick a nice environment to run in. Where possible, get out and exercise as the sun rises. It's fantastic.

Source: Nick Harris Fry, Coach Magazine,



Recognizing and Easing the Physical Symptoms of Anxiety

You've had headaches on and off, or possibly nausea, or muscle pain. It could be emotions, rather than a physical illness, driving your symptoms. Blame your autonomic nervous system. This is a system in your body that you don't consciously control, but that regulates things like your heart rate, breathing, urination, and sexual function. It's also the system that reacts when you are under a physical threat. The autonomic nervous system produces your fight-or-flight response, which is designed to help you defend yourself or run away from danger. When you are under stress or anxious, this system kicks into action, and physical symptoms can appear—headaches, nausea, shortness of breath, shakiness, or stomach pain. “Doctors see it all the time—patients with real pain or other symptoms, but nothing is physically wrong with them,” says Dr. Arthur Barsky, professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. In today's world, with the COVID-19 pandemic and its economic toll, many people may be noticing new physical symptoms without realizing what's causing them. “This is a terribly stressful time,” says Dr. Barsky. “There is stress about what our lives are like, the ominous threat of getting the virus and getting sick. It's already clear that the pandemic is heightening anxiety and sense of stress.” For some people, this situation is the start of a vicious cycle. “Anxiety and stress themselves produce these physical symptoms, and on top of that your reaction to those symptoms can make them worse. The more you focus on them, the more alarmed you become, and the more intense your symptoms become,” says Dr. Barsky. “It can get really out of control and become so uncomfortable that you might not be able to do much more than sit and worry.” **Identifying and easing anxiety.** It's possible to become so fixated on the physical effects of your anxious state that that you don't even realize you were anxious to begin with, says Barsky. So how do you know if anxiety is causing your symptoms? And if it is, how can you feel better? Dr. Barsky offers some tips to help you interrupt this cycle. **Stop and assess.** “The first step is to pause for second and observe what's goin on with your body,” says Dr. Barsky. Think about what you are experiencing and whether it relates to a feeling of emotional upset or a reaction to something alarming or stressful. If our symptoms followed a stressful event or period of time, it's possible these emotions triggered your symptoms. Also, be alert to signs that you are tensing your muscles,

which can also indicate a stress reaction. **Distract yourself.** If you suspect anxiety is at the root of your physical symptoms, distraction can be a helpful tool. “It's good to build a repertoire of thing that can distract you from your focus on your body. Look at a photo album. Do the laundry,” says Dr. Barsky. Even something as simple as watering the plants or putting together a jigsaw puzzle can help. “This can fairly reliably get you out of a cycle of increased anxiety and increased physical symptoms,” says Dr. Barsky. Very often, once you move on to another actively and take your mind off your symptoms, you'll start to feel better. Distractions are different for each person. Try different activities to figure out what takes your mind to a calm place. **Relax your body—or work it.** To relieve stress, try some dip breathing or relaxation exercises. There are numerous online resources and smartphone apps that can help guide you through relaxation techniques. Physical activity can also help you relieve tension. Try to squeeze in a daily walk or a run. **Reassure yourself.** If you believe your symptoms are being caused by anxiety, reassure yourself that that what you are experiencing is not harmful or fatal. “They're not serious, and they don't signal an impending medical disaster,” says Dr. Barsky. The symptoms will pass when the anxiety eases. **Get checked.** There is a difference between anxiety that triggers physical symptoms and physical symptoms that trigger anxiety, says Dr Barsky. For example, people who are having an asthma attack and therefore having trouble breathing will likely feel anxious. But anxiety is not causing their shortness of breath. If you have a physical problem that does not resolve with relaxation or other techniques, contact your doctor to have it checked out. **Know when to seek help.** Simple anxiety sometimes crosses the line and becomes an anxiety disorder. Signs that you might have a problem include shying away from activities because you are fearful, or being so preoccupied with worry that it affects your ability to function. If this sounds like you, it's time to seek some help. Anxiety disorders are very treatable using a variety of different approaches, says Dr. Barsky.

Source: Harvard Health Publishing, Harvard Medical School, August 2020.

Vista Psychological & Counseling Centre, LLC
1201 South Main Street, Suite 100, North Canton, OH 44720
330.244.8782 (Phone) 330.244.8795 (Fax) www.vistapcc.com

