

The Mixed Messages in our Society About Drinking Alcohol

An Issue of Mixed Messages

How can something as prevalent, accepted, and accessible in our society as drinking alcohol be so harmful, unhealthy, AND illegal when consumed at or slightly above moderate intake levels? The simple asking of this question immediately uncovers a number of issues, one of which is the mixed messages that exist in our society about drinking alcohol.

The Accessibility and Acceptability of Alcohol

On the one hand, consider the thousands upon thousands of bars and taverns in the United States. Now add to this list the restaurants, night clubs, sporting events, festivals, state fairs, hotels, casinos, carnivals, etc. where alcoholic beverages are regularly served. Moreover, add the grocery stores, liquor stores, beverage stores, the Convenient Food Marts, the 7/11 stores, and the state stores where an adult can legally purchase as many bottles, cans, and/or cases of alcoholic beverages as he or she desires.

Is Drinking Alcohol Cool?

Not only is alcohol extremely accessible in our society but there are also a number of factors that reinforce the idea that drinking alcohol is "cool." For instance, consider beer advertisements and commercials on TV. Indeed, it can be argued that some of the most memorable, funniest, and "best" commercials and advertisements on TV have been those that were associated with drinking beer. To push the point further, why would beer manufacturers spend millions of dollars for a commercial during the Super Bowl if this expenditure did not lead to more sales? From a slightly different perspective, consider professional athletes and movie stars who, by their actions and advertisements, reinforce the idea that drinking alcohol is "cool."

Religious Rituals and Cultural Traditions

When religious rituals that make use of alcohol, cultural traditions that encourage drinking alcohol, special events and holidays that are associated with drinking alcohol, and the increasing popularity of adding alcohol to food for enhanced flavor--when all of these are factored into the equation, it becomes obvious that alcohol is deeply ingrained in our society. The point: when people are surrounded with alcohol and bombarded by events, traditions, holidays, and advertisements that are alcohol-related, it becomes part of their socialization process that in turn makes it easier to simply accept that they should drink alcohol if they are to "fit in" and become members of our society.

Alcohol Abuse and Drinking While Driving

If the prevalence, acceptability, and accessibility of alcohol represent the one side of the coin regarding the mixed messages in our society, then the dangerousness, unhealthiness, and illegality represents the other. Indeed, consider the numerous negative and harmful messages and statistics associated with alcohol abuse and drinking while driving that we have heard from the medical community, federal government, police, politicians, organizations such as MADD, and school and college administrators.

Mixed Messages and Their Consequences

When something like alcohol use is so intimately ingrained in the fabric of our society, it becomes extremely difficult to significantly alter its use and abuse in a comprehensive and beneficial manner. I assert that one of the consequences of the mixed messages about alcohol use and abuse in our society is that it becomes extremely difficult for many individuals, especially our youth, to realistically see the destructive, unhealthy, and sometimes fatal aspects of alcohol abuse.

The Influence of the Judicial System

Unfortunately, the judicial system and the ways in which it has dealt with alcohol-related offenses is another example of the mixed messages in our society about alcohol. For instance, until very recently, people who have received multiple DUIs have, in many instances, simply received a "slap on the wrist" for their alcohol-related behavior.

Fortunately, some states are becoming more reality and accountability-based and are making it a felony when a person receives his or her 4th DUI within a ten-year period. In Minnesota, for instance, this sentence includes three years in prison and a fine of not less than \$14,000.00.

Incarceration AND Treatment

Sending people to jail for alcohol-related offenses, however, is not a viable "solution" unless the person receives help for his or her alcohol problem while incarcerated. True, the offending person is "off the streets" while incarcerated. When the jail or prison sentence is completed, however, a person who has received alcoholism treatment while incarcerated is more likely to become a responsible person who doesn't continue to drink while driving and less likely to become a repeat offender.

Responsible Behavior

I am not necessarily disagreeing with those who preach "responsible behavior" regarding drinking. The bottom line, however, is one's definition of "responsible behavior." Let me explain. Let's say that I have a lake that is used for swimming and that for whatever reason, hundreds of snapping turtles have populated this lake. Some people may say that "responsible behavior" in this example consists of warning all swimmers about the turtles and telling them to "be careful" while swimming. Others with a different point of view, however, might say that "responsible behavior" in this instance means warning the swimmers about the turtles, telling them to be careful while swimming, AND, at the same time, significantly reducing the turtle population so that there is less chance that the swimmers will get bit.

What Can Be Done?

If our society is more enlightened and more aware of the health hazards, fatalities, and destructive consequences of alcohol abuse and alcoholism, then why don't we practice "responsible behavior" and make alcohol less available, less advertised, less glamorized, and less "cool" while at the same time increasing the advertisements, commercials, and public service messages that emphasize healthy and safe alcohol-free activities and lifestyles?

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Denny Soinski, Ph.D, writes about alcohol abuse, alcohol addiction, alcohol testing, alcoholism, alcohol recovery, alcohol treatment, and alcohol rehab. For more information, please visit <http://www.About-Alcohol-Abuse.com> right away!

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