

## Attentional bias for alcohol-related information

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### **Aim**

This study investigated how different individuals react to alcohol related words. A task known as the modified alcohol Stroop test was used to assess how distracting these words were.

### **Background**

Young people start to develop attitudes about alcohol (prior to drinking alcohol) by observing drinking behaviour at home or among their peers, which leads to ideas being formed about the positive or negative consequences of alcohol use. Researchers have found that children with a history of familial alcoholism appear to develop these ideas at an earlier age than children from non-alcoholic families (Zucker, Kincaid, Fitzgerald and Bingham, 1995).

Family history of alcoholism is one of the most often noted risk factors for the development of later unhealthy alcohol involvement, which includes frequent heavy drinking and alcohol use disorders (Sher & Gotham, 1999).

### **Participants**

15 alcohol-dependent patients, 15 non-dependent social drinkers, 15 individuals with a history of parental alcoholism and 15 individuals of non alcohol-dependent parents participated in the study.

Children of alcohol-dependent parents (mean age = 17.80 years, age range = 15 – 20 years) were nine males and six females who had one or both parents suffering from alcohol dependence. The treatment status of the parents was mixed, with some having undergone treatment in the past, whereas others had never undergone treatment. Children of non alcohol-dependent parents (mean age = 18.20 years, age range = 16 – 19 years) were eight males and seven females selected on the basis that they had no known history of parental alcoholism.

### **Results**

Alcohol-dependent patients did not show significant distraction for alcohol-related words and it was suggested that the process of undergoing treatment for alcohol addiction may have an effect on reducing distraction for substance-related information.

Individuals with parent(s) suffering from alcohol dependence showed significant distraction for alcohol-related words compared to adolescents with no history of parental alcoholism.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, this study demonstrates that distraction for alcohol-related stimuli can occur in individuals who have a history of parental alcoholism and also that treatment may be effective in reducing distraction towards these alcohol-related cues in individuals undergoing treatment for alcohol addiction. It would be useful for further research to examine factors that may influence the relationship between having an alcohol-dependent parent and showing such distraction (e.g. whether the individual lived with their alcoholic parent, at what age, whether the parent underwent treatment or not etc.) It seems that, for children of alcoholics, alcohol is

seen as something dangerous and uncontrollable. There may need to be some form of family therapy (Carmichael Olson, O'Connor & Fitzgerald, 2001) that takes place during the treatment of an alcohol-dependent patient. This would allow all members of the family to try to come to terms with the various issues surrounding the problem and also so that alcohol can be seen for what it is – a liquid, that in small doses, can be a source of pleasure, not pain.

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