

# Blacking Out and Its Impact on Students

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Did you know that blacking out from consuming too much alcohol is also referred to as “alcohol related amnesia”. We all know what amnesia is: a loss of memory. Few of us, however, routinely associate the devastating effects of amnesia to alcohol consumption, however.

In pivotal research regarding blacking out, 51% of the students who had ever consumed alcohol reported blacking out at some point in their lives, and 40 % reported experiencing a blackout in the year before the survey (White et al., 2002). Fast-forward to 2008 and National College Health Assessment data show that more than 30% of students self report high-risk drinking (NCHA, 2007). High-risk drinking has a correlation to negative outcomes including alcohol blackouts.

But, what does it mean to black out? What are the risk factors that contribute to the condition?

## Passing Out vs. Blacking Out

Passing out is different than blacking out. Many people use the terms passing out and blacking out interchangeably, but they actually refer to very separate incidents. A blackout is a period of amnesia during which a person is actively engaged in behaviors such as walking and talking, but the brain is unable to form new memories for the events. Far from losing consciousness, research suggests that it is possible for individuals to experience blackouts while appearing only moderately intoxicated to the outside world.

The term passing out is not defined as clearly in the research, but it is generally used to mean either falling asleep from excessive drinking or literally drinking oneself unconscious. Passing out indicates the occurrence of a state that is unlikely to allow any type of activity. Unlike individuals experiencing a blackout, those who pass out are unconscious and do not

## Blackouts

- Blackouts tend to occur after rapid consumption of large amounts of alcohol and drinking on an empty stomach.
- Large amounts of alcohol, particularly if consumed rapidly, can produce partial, or complete blackouts.
- Blackouts do not involve a loss of consciousness. Individuals can engage in a wide range of often complicated behaviors during blackouts – from driving cars to having sexual intercourse and spending money (White, et al., 2002)
- Blackouts represent episodes of amnesia during which individuals are capable of participating even in important, emotionally charged events they later cannot remember (Goodwin, 1995).
- Females are at greater risk than males for experiencing blackouts, likely due to factors such as differences in body weight and proportion of body fat.
- Blacking out is not just a problem among alcoholics. Increasing evidence shows it occurs among social drinkers ([www.enotalone.com/article/1281.html](http://www.enotalone.com/article/1281.html)).
- Combining rapid consumption with drug use can dramatically increase likelihood of experiencing blackouts.
- In one study, approximately half of all college students who

actively engage in behaviors they may not remember the next day.

### **Role of Memory**

To better understand how blacking out differs from passing out, it is helpful to have a basic understanding of the brain and how it forms memory. Alcohol impacts most stages of memory creation; however, its main effect appears to be on the transfer of information from short-term to long-term memory.

Intoxicated individuals are usually able to recall information immediately after it is presented to them and even keep it active in short-term memory for about one minute if they are not distracted. They are also able to recall long-term memories created prior to becoming intoxicated, such as how to drive a car, walk, etc. However, beginning with just one or two drinks, individuals begin to show impairments in the ability to transfer information into long-term memory storage.

Under some circumstances alcohol can impact this process so severely that, once sober again, subjects are unable to recall critical elements of events, or even entire events that occurred while intoxicated. Such impairments are known as blackouts.

### **The Signs**

It is difficult to recognize signs and symptoms of someone in blackout. This is because outwardly they may be acting only moderately intoxicated, or even sober to some. There are some signs, however, that a student could be in trouble: Has this person had several drinks in a short amount of time without eating food or drinking water? Is this person repeating themselves frequently? Are they easily distracted and do they keep forgetting where they are or what they or others just said? Do they appear to be unconcerned about the thoughts and feelings of those around them?

Blacking out is a serious consequence of heavy drinking. Unlike when a student passes out or loses consciousness and stops engaging with others, a student in blackout can actively participate in his or her surroundings. A student may attempt to

- drank reported experiencing at least one blackout (White, et al., 2002)
- Additional research about brain functioning, alcohol's effect on the brain, as well as the prevalence of passing out and blacking out is needed, particularly among the college population.

### **What Can You Do?**

- Understand what blacking out is and the dangers inherent in blacking out.
- Learn strategies for avoiding situations that can lead to blacking out.
- Stick with a group of people when you go out and make sure you all leave together.
- Speak up rather than acting as a passive bystander in risky situations.
- Eat food before going out and between drinks.
- Drink water when you are consuming alcohol. It will help you stay hydrated as well as slow down the pace of drinking.
- Re-think pre-partying. This activity often involves rapid consumption of alcohol over a brief period of time.
- Never leave someone who has been drinking alone.
- Designate a sober, non-drinking driver, perhaps whether there is a vehicle in use or not. This individual can help ensure that everyone who came together, leaves together.

Often it is difficult to tell when someone is in a blackout state. Following lower risk drinking guidelines, however, can be a productive start to reduce the likelihood of experiencing blackouts.

complete activities that can put others in danger, and it is likely he or she will have no memory of his or her actions the next day.

## Sources

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