

The consequences of binge drinking don't end in adolescence. The choices teens make today can leave their futures...

DESTROYED

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It starts with one beer.

Then another.

Then maybe a couple of shots of vodka later, and it becomes hard to see clearly or remember exactly what was said three minutes ago.

And then everything goes dark.

While many students make a habit of binge drinking, they have little knowledge of the dangers and how it could affect them in the future.



LINDSEY SQUEGLIA

Dr. Lindsay Squeglia, associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at M.U.S.C., studies alcoholism and the factors of teenage drinking. Through her research, Squeglia found that students who are most "vulnerable" to start binge drinking are those with family members who struggle with alcohol use disorder.

"A lot of the research that I have done shows that there are differences in kids brains before they start drinking that actually predict which kids go on to drink," said Squeglia, a Wando graduate. "So the brain is structured differently and functions differently."

If the tasks that require the use of the frontal lobe of the brain -- judgement, decision-making, inhibition -- are weaker as a child, it is more likely for those kinds to drink during adolescence, Squeglia said.

There are cultural and peer-related factors to inducing this kind of behavior as well, including if a teen starts spending time with others who excessively drink every weekend.

Health teacher Holly Kut teaches freshman about the dangers of drinking and how a student can resist.

"Peer pressure really is the biggest culprit behind binge drinking," she said. "That is why we teach this class as freshmen, so we can... give them that kind of information before they start getting older... so they at least have some sort of informative decision before they start drinking."

Once teens get involved in binge drinking -- including the habitual nature of it which can be every weekend -- the impact can carry into adulthood. These teens are what Kut calls "weekend alcoholics" that build up a alcohol tolerance and dependence.

"They make a correlation between binge drinking and the experience they are having with their friends of which they think is fun, and they cannot imagine that fun without alcohol," she said.

Some of Squeglia's research shows people who reported drinking before age 15 were four times more likely to become alcohol dependent than those who wait until age 21.

The average age that the brain stops developing and maturing is at age 25, which is four years after adults can legally drink. By refraining from drinking during adolescence, the health detriments will be slim to none, Squeglia said.

"Every year that someone waits to start using alcohol, the likelihood of them having a problematic alcohol use disorder in their lifetime decreases by 14 percent," she said.

The recommendation Squeglia and her colleagues give is to just wait -- wait as long as possible to drink. One, to avoid breaking the law, and two, to let the brain reach its full potential.

"Adolescence is a really, really important neurodevelopmental period in kids' lives," Squeglia said. "Kids who start drinking earlier tend to have more problems [developmentally]."

Binge drinking over all age groups is most dangerous because it can get out of control rapidly, but Squeglia said in teens, it can be even more hazardous.

"Kids tend to have less negative effects and more positive effects from alcohol than adults do," Squeglia said. "They have less hangovers and less motor impairment when they drink... because of how their brain is while undergoing all of this development."

Teens find drinking to be extremely rewarding by "facilitating socialization," without experiencing as many of the negative side-effects.

"There are these reward regions in the brain that tend to develop faster than the frontal cognitive control regions," she said. "So a lot of people will use this analogy that adolescents' brains tend to have a lot of the gas pedal but not enough brakes quite yet."

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Another immediate effect from losing control while binge drinking is the blackout, which has many misconceptions. But it is a period of time where the teen is still awake, making decisions and carrying out mechanical processes like walking and talking, but "the brain is not coding information," Squeglia said.

The brain at this point would not be encoding memories, therefore when the person tries to think about that time, they draw a blank.

There is a large difference between blacking out and passing out -- passing out being completely falling asleep and not making any decisions after excessive drinking. A lot of times a teenager at a party will pass out, and their peers will just think that they can sleep it off and be fine. But this is not the case.

"But they don't realize they've had so much alcohol, even though they are passed out, their blood-alcohol content is still rising," Kut said. "The biggest fear of not getting someone help is getting in trouble... but if that person dies, they are in much more trouble than if they had called for help."

South Carolina does not have an amnesty law, which protects those who call the ambulance for someone at an underage party, "which is unfortunate," Kut said.

"This is definitely something that has been in the news a lot lately... I think that the important point is being responsible and knowing what you're getting into and know that binge drinking in particular is the most dangerous," Squeglia said. "You are putting yourself at higher risk for blacking out,... being sexually assaulted,... getting in a car with a drunk driver"

The danger of harming others and not being able to protect oneself against harm is heightened while inebriated, putting a lot of risk into the hands of those with impaired decision-making skills.

Kut said that Wando's health department are making changes to the curriculum to accommodate a more in-depth teaching of addiction and the dangers of alcohol. They have recently expanded the program and its alcohol and drug unit's length.

Squeglia is continuing her research to find more out about the individualized nature of the causes of binge drinking.

"We are not saying never [to drinking]," Squeglia said. "we're just saying delay, delay, delay."

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