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The Case for (and Against) "Mocktails"

By Bryan Welch

During this holiday season, thoughts are turning to celebrations both at work and with family, friends, and loved ones. For many, 'tis the season when it is hard not to overindulge with alcohol. In fact, this time of year can be so difficult for people who are trying to abstain from alcohol that the recovery community often refers to the period from Thanksgiving through Christmas and the New Year as the "Bermuda Triangle"—when some people disappear from recovery meetings because they have resorted to old behaviors and started drinking. Opportunities for legal professionals to drink during the holidays are more prevalent, and drinking is encouraged and even expected at many events. Of course, this cultural pressure presents challenges for people who are choosing to drink less or not at all.

The good news is that attitudes about alcohol use are starting to change. A recent Gallup poll[1] found that the percentage of adults who report abstinence from alcohol has increased since 2001, especially for people aged 18-34. In 2001, 28% of that cohort reported abstinence, compared with 42% in 2024. This age group is also more likely to view alcohol use as harmful. The shift appears to be a factor driving the surge in people using "mocktails" to help moderate their alcohol use or eliminate it entirely.

It stands to reason that replacing alcoholic drinks with nonalcoholic beverages should reduce alcohol consumption and, hopefully, the negative effects of drinking. However, this theory has never been studied or empirically confirmed. Recently, a team of researchers led by Dr. Molly Bowdring from Stanford University surveyed 2,500 people[2] to learn more about the relationship between mocktails[3] and alcohol use, hoping to provide enough data to encourage more research.

Dr. Bowdring analyzed the responses of both people with alcohol use disorder (AUD) and those without. Of note, the authors found that people who either reported having an alcohol use disorder or screened as at risk for having AUD were more likely to drink mocktails in an attempt to modify their drinking behavior. While this group reported that their overall alcohol use declined, it was also true that drinking more non-alcoholic drinks correlated with higher scores on a common measure of "risky" drinking (measured by number of drinks consumed in one sitting and the number of days per week people drink). The survey suggests that more research is necessary to investigate whether or not mocktails help reduce the harmful effects of drinking for people with AUD.

Moreover, the authors note, because of the nature of alcohol use disorder, it is possible and even likely that mocktails could be "triggering" to people attempting to abstain or who are in recovery. The sound of ice in the glass, the type of glass, the feel and smell of a drink in the hand, maybe the particular room, or even the people nearby can all be strongly associated with the behavior of drinking and the *reward* of feeling intoxicated. After all, addiction (oversimplified, to be sure) is the result of an impairment of the brain's reward system—evolutionarily one of the oldest survival systems in the brain. It helps us identify *and remember* where the good food is so we can find it again. Our brain needs to remember which fork in the path we took to find the awesome berry bush because if we don't, we might not survive. Therefore, the brain has a system that records and remembers what was happening right before we got to the bush. Every time we go down that path, the association gets stronger. Eventually, we don't even have to think about it—we just go down the path to get the berries. The more it happens, the harder it is to deviate from the path, and *the more strongly we want the berries*. That's what "triggers" are—signposts telling us the reward is close at hand to make sure we go get it. In a brain with AUD, this trigger response happens over and over and over. Since an important part of recovery is extinguishing these strong associations, drinking mocktails may interfere with this process.

To be clear, there are many reasons to drink nonalcoholic beverages instead of alcohol. In the survey, wanting to quit or cut down on alcohol consumption was only the fifth most-often cited reason for choosing a mocktail. The most common desire expressed was to eliminate short-term harmful effects such as hangovers, followed by concerns for overall health. Wanting to fit in socially when not drinking was important. People also cited medical, financial, and religious reasons. Mocktails may help people achieve those goals, at least among people for whom alcohol use is not problematic. However, people with alcohol use disorder who want to abstain from alcohol should consider avoiding mocktails altogether, at least while in early recovery and until there is more research.

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ENDNOTES

1. Brenan, Megan. “Alcohol consumption increasingly viewed as unhealthy in U.S.” Gallup. August 13, 2024. https://news.gallup.com/poll/648413/alcohol-consumption-increasingly-viewed-unhealthy.aspx#:~:text=Gallup%20has%20measured%20Americans'%20views,is%20bad%20for%20one's%20health.
2. Bowdring, M.A., McCarthy, D.M., Fairbairn, C.E., & Prochaska, J.J. “Non-alcoholic beverage consumption among US adults who consume alcohol.” Society for the Study of Addiction. February 25, 2024. https://doi.org/10.1111/add.16452.
3. For the purpose of their survey, Bowdring, et al. referred to nonalcoholic beverages (NABs) as beverages primarily designed to mimic alcoholic beverages—specifically, nonalcoholic beer and wine and zero-proof mocktails made with nonalcoholic substitutes for classic liquors. I use the term mocktails synonymously with NABs.