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Alcohol Therapy May Improve Domestic Violence Problems in the Short Term

Male heavy drinkers arrested for domestic violence, who participate in a therapy session devoted to alcohol, were less aggressive toward their partners in the months after the counseling, according to a new study.

Men arrested for domestic violence generally are referred by the court to group education sessions that don't always address alcohol use, even though a high percentage of domestic violence involves drinking, Reuters reports.

Previous research has found these programs are particularly ineffective for men involved in domestic violence who have drinking problems, according to researchers of the new study from the University of Tennessee. They studied 252 men who were arrested for violence against an intimate partner, and who reported binge drinking—having five or more drinks on one occasion—at least once a month.

All of the men attended court-mandated domestic violence education programs that consisted of 20 two-hour sessions of group education. Half of the men also attended a 90-minute individual substance abuse session with a therapist.

Participants completed a survey about their behavior at three, six and 12 months after the program ended. The researchers also gathered police reports related to the study participants. On average, all of the men in the study reported lower violence levels after one year. The men who received the extra alcohol counseling session had greater short-term improvement in violence and alcohol consumption, compared with men who did not receive the individual alcohol counseling, the researchers report in the journal Addiction.

Men who received alcohol counseling were less physically aggressive toward their partners at the three-month mark, and less psychologically aggressive at six months. They also drank less per day at three months, and drank less often at six months. However, after one year, the levels of physical and psychological aggression in both groups were similar.

Lead researcher Gregory Stuart told Reuters he thinks the results of this study are a promising start toward improving batterer programs. "The goal is to gently lead them to the conclusion that potentially stopping the use of alcohol and drugs is a good idea," he said.