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Surrey Big Drink Debate

Stress Reaction: Women Get Depressed, Men Drink Alcohol

Very different gender-based reactions

What they say about men being from Mars and women from Venus is now an almost established fact, as is also that they have different brains and different behaviors. However, this becomes all the more obvious when it comes to them coping with stress. Women facing stressful situations are more prone to depression and anxiety, while men in the same situation have an alcohol-craving response, as revealed by a new study to be published in the July issue of *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research*. "Following a stressful experience, women are more likely than men to say that they feel sad or anxious, which may lead to risk for depression and anxiety disorders. Some studies have found that men are more likely to drink alcohol following stress than women. If this becomes a pattern, it could lead to alcohol-use disorders," said leading author Tara M. Chaplin, associate research scientist at the Yale University School of Medicine. The team asked 54 healthy adult social drinker subjects (27 women, 27 men) to watch 3 types of imagery scripts (stressful, alcohol-related, and neutral/relaxing) on different days and in random order. The team focused on the subjects' personal emotions, behavioral/physiological responses, cardiovascular arousal (like heart rate and blood pressure) and self-reported alcohol craving. "After listening to the stressful story, women reported more sadness and anxiety than men, as well as greater behavioral arousal. But, for the men... emotional arousal was linked to increases in alcohol craving. In other words, when men are upset, they are more likely to want alcohol. These findings - in addition to the fact that the men drank more than the women on average - meant that the men had more experience with alcohol, perhaps leading them to turn to alcohol as a way of coping with distress. Men's tendency to crave alcohol when upset may be a learned behavior or may be related to known gender differences in reward pathways in the brain," Chaplin explained. "Women are more likely than men to focus on negative emotional aspects of stressful circumstances, for example, they tend to 'ruminate' or think over and over again about their negative emotional state. Men, in contrast, are more likely to distract themselves from negative emotions, to try not to think about these emotions. Our finding that men had greater blood pressure response to stress, but did not report greater sadness and anxiety, may reflect that they are more likely to try to distract themselves from their physiological arousal, possibly through the use of alcohol," she concluded by saying.