

Understanding the Unique Psychological Impacts of Alcohol-Related Regretted Sex

Chloe J. Adams, MS, Hannah Cooper, MS, Emily Kelly, MS, Charlotte Beard, PhD, & Amie L. Haas, PhD
Palo Alto University

Background

Alcohol use is a known predictor of risky sexual activity on college campuses. Both alcohol use and sexual risk taking (SRT) are associated with adverse mental health consequences such as depression and negative mood states (i.e., anger, tension, and fatigue). One form of SRT is regretted sex, which is reported by nearly half of college students in the US. Despite the high prevalence of regretted sex, the mental health consequences associated with experiencing it are understudied. The psychological impacts of regretted sex may differ than those associated with other forms of risky sex (e.g., unsafe sex, unwanted sex), as it is a different construct than other SRT behaviors. Additionally, it is unclear which factors (e.g., gender) may influence experiences of psychological consequences associated with regretted sex. Some research suggests that the consequences of regretted sex are higher for women and that gender influences reasons for regret. However, a better understanding of the impacts of regretted sex is needed to inform intervention efforts.

Purpose: Expand on our understanding of psychological consequences associated with alcohol-related regretted sex, including how long consequences last and if consequences exist independent of alcohol use.

Measures

- Demographic Questionnaire (age, gender, ethnicity)
- Alcohol Use, including:
 - Quantity and Frequency Index (QFI)
 - Heavy Episodic Drinking (HED; 5/4 Criterion)
- Experiences of regretted sex
 - Never
 - Baseline
 - Spring
 - Both
- Patient Health Questionnaire - 8 (PHQ-8)
- Profile of Mood States (POMS)
 - Anger Subscale
 - Fatigue Subscale
 - Tension Subscale

Participants

N = 277 undergraduate student alcohol users
 M age: 18.2 years old
 52% Males (sex assigned at birth [SAB])
 66.3% White; 12.4% Latinx; 14.3% Asian/Pacific Islander; 6.6% Other
Regretted Sex Engagement
 Never: 74.7% Baseline: 12%
 Spring: 7.2% Both: 6.5%

Results

Table 1
ANCOVA Results for PHQ-8, POMS-Anger, POMS-Tension, and POMS-Fatigue Models

	PHQ-8		POMS-Anger		POMS-Tension		POMS-Fatigue	
	F	Partial Eta Squared	F	Partial Eta Squared	F	Partial Eta Squared	F	Partial Eta Squared
Corrected Model	3.38*	0.09	1.36	0.04	1.82	0.05	1.80	0.05
Intercept	183.00*	0.40	499.38*	0.65	646.76*	0.70	644.07*	0.70
Alcohol Use	7.21*	0.03	0.57	0.00	4.08*	0.02	1.48	0.00
Regretted Sex	6.18*	0.06	3.53*	0.04	3.75*	0.04	1.95	0.02
SAB	0.29	0.00	0.09	0.00	0.08	0.00	3.08*	0.01
Regretted Sex x SAB	0.56	0.01	0.17	0.00	0.39	0.00	1.18	0.01
		Adj. R ² = 0.06		Adj. R ² = 0.01		Adj. R ² =0.02		Adj. R ² =0.02

Note. * indicates significance at $p < .05$

Table 2
Mean Scores on Each Outcome Measures for Each Regretted Sex Timepoint

	Mean Scores: PHQ-8	Mean Scores: POMS-Anger	Mean Scores: POMS-Tension	Mean Scores: POMS-Fatigue
Never	4.76 ^a	9.02 ^a	10.72 ^a	13.10 ^a
Baseline	6.20 ^{a,b}	10.79 ^b	11.87 ^{a,b}	14.62 ^a
Spring	7.02 ^{b,c}	10.86 ^b	12.33 ^{a,b}	14.47 ^a
Both	8.99 ^c	10.49 ^{a,b}	13.59 ^b	14.99 ^a

- Any occurrence of regretted sex is associated with mild depressive symptoms, and PHQ-8 scores are significantly higher for those with recent engagement (spring or both)
- Those who engaged in regretted sex at one time point (baseline or spring) had higher state anger than those with no engagement
- Those with engagement in regretted sex at both time points may experience more tension than those with no engagement
- Regretted sex had a significant, though weak, association with depression, anger, and tension
- Regretted sex is associated with higher depression and tension, even after controlling for overall alcohol use
- The overall model explained only 6% of the variance in depression
- SAB did not emerge as a significant moderator when controlling for alcohol use, differing from prior literature

Implications, & Future Directions

- Alcohol use is a contributory factor to SRT, but regretted sex alone is associated with unique psychological consequences aside from alcohol use.
- Interventions should target mental health concerns such as depression, particularly with students with recent engagement in regretted sex.
- Future research should:
 - look at additional psychological consequences such as anxiety, guilt, and hypervigilance
 - assess the psychological impacts of other forms of SRT (e.g., unsafe, unwanted) for comparison

