

Alcohol and other substances play complex roles in young people's experience of attempted suicide

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Alcohol and other substances play complex roles in suicidal behavior among young people. Gaining a better understanding of these impacts

can help services better support young people, according to experts at the University of Birmingham.

In a new study, published in *PLoS ONE*, researchers from the University's Institute of Mental Health and School of Psychology investigated in depth the lived experiences of a group of seven [young people](#) between the ages of 16 and 25 who had made attempts to end their life and subsequently recovered.

Participants described their use of [alcohol](#) and other [substances](#) on occasions as a way to escape unwanted and overwhelming emotions, or memories; and to cope with other [mental health](#) experiences such as voices and mania that may cause them to struggle to connect with people around them.

At the same time, however, alcohol and other substance use can also contribute to an increase in suicidal thoughts and behavior. The study participants all identified this "double-edged sword" of alcohol and other substance use. In particular, participants described the ways in which alcohol contributed to intensify sometimes overwhelming emotions, which in turn led to increased levels of distress. Some participants also reported that their [suicide attempts](#) were impulsive and often fuelled by the consumption of alcohol or other substances.

Rebecca Guest, a study co-author in the University of Birmingham's School of Psychology, said: "Our study is the first to explore in such detail young people's experience of attempted suicide in the context of alcohol and substance use and offers a greater understanding of this complex relationship."

"All of our study participants identified that alcohol and other substances had a [negative effect](#) on their mental health, or personal relationships—but at the same time they turned to them as a way of

managing emotions and interpersonal conflict."

Professor Alex Copello also a study co-author in the University of Birmingham's School of Psychology, said: "The insights based on young people's experiences are really valuable in developing better interventions to prevent suicide. For example, [health](#) practitioners should aim to identify not just whether a young person is drinking alcohol, but to understand what motivates that use to assess the young person's risk of suicide and to identify what support is needed."

Study co-author, Dr. Maria Michail, in the University of Birmingham's Institute for Mental Health, added: "The views of people with lived experience should be at the very heart of suicide prevention policy. "This Friday (10 September) is World Suicide Prevention Day with charities worldwide working to reinforce the message that suicide can be prevented. In this context, we hope our ongoing research will support organizations working to deliver improved services for young people who are at-risk of [suicide](#)."

More information: Rebecca Guest et al, A qualitative exploration of young people's experiences of attempted suicide in the context of alcohol and substance use, *PLOS ONE* (2021). [DOI: 10.1371/journal.pone.0256915](#)

Provided by University of Birmingham

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