

Everything in Moderation

You've probably heard the saying that you can have too much of a good thing. Think about the last time you went out with friends and maybe overindulged in drinks. The hangover the next day likely felt awful. As the old saying goes, sometimes "the hair of the dog that bit you" is the solution commonly suggested. This phrase refers to the belief that consuming a small amount of the same alcoholic beverage that caused the hangover can ease the symptoms. But why is that? How can the substance that led to this situation also be the proposed remedy?

Dopamine: The Feel-Good Hormone

That's where dopamine comes into play. You've likely heard of dopamine referred to as the "feel good" brain chemical; it's a hormone produced in the brain's limbic system (or emotional center). When we engage in activities that bring us pleasure and elicit happy feelings, it is dopamine that gets released. For instance, when you participate in something active like exercising, your brain releases endorphins and dopamine, providing you with a sense of energy, accomplishment, and satisfaction. Certain substances, such as alcohol, can also trigger the release of dopamine, leading to temporary feelings of euphoria. **However, alcohol releases a significant surge of dopamine all at once, making drinking feel rewarding.** Unfortunately, that fleeting sensation fades away, leaving you with feelings of lethargy and sadness. But dopamine is not the villain. It's a naturally occurring hormone in our bodies.

More Than a Feeling

The dysfunction, or problem, occurs when you consistently overstimulate your brain to produce larger-than-normal amounts of dopamine. **This overstimulation can lead to a tolerance, where the same amount of alcohol no longer provides the joyful and pleasurable feeling you once experienced at the beginning.** To achieve that same feeling, you have to consume more and more alcohol. **Eventually, your threshold for experiencing pleasure shifts to a need to avoid the adverse effects of alcohol withdrawal.** You no longer drink for enjoyment; instead, you do so to fend off headaches, nausea, bloating, and other symptoms.

Finding Your Balance

How can we keep the dopamine flowing without creating a problem for ourselves in the future?

1. **Staying active:** Keeping our bodies moving releases normal amounts of dopamine, which stimulates that feel-good sensation. It doesn't have to be high-intensity exercise; even a walk around your neighborhood, playing pickleball at the park, or enjoying any other activities you like can help. This role of physical

activity in maintaining dopamine levels can inspire and motivate you to incorporate more movement into your daily routine.

2. **Substitute the substance:** You can enjoy a wide range of mocktails and non-alcoholic beverages while socializing or having a meal. If you'd like to savor a glass of wine with dinner, consider reducing your intake or trying an alcohol-free option. This shift towards healthier alternatives empowers you to make conscious decisions about your alcohol consumption, placing you in control of your well-being.
3. **Explore new dopamine-boosting activities:** Do you have a hobby you loved when you were younger? Is there a new craft you've been wanting to learn? Perhaps you'd like to try making pottery or take that cooking class at the market? Other activities that can enhance dopamine production include gardening, playing a musical instrument, or even having a stimulating conversation with a friend.

Ultimately, that good feeling is not difficult to find. You can break the vicious cycle of needing to drink more and more to achieve that same release of feel-good dopamine by reducing or eliminating your alcohol intake. When you do this, you remind your brain what normal dopamine levels feel like. Incorporating new activities or enjoying your current ones in a different way can provide a longer-lasting sense of joy, satisfaction, and motivation.

References

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