

What is Alcohol?

Expectation – Intoxication

Honestly, the most common reasons for people in Sri Lanka (and similar societies around the world) to choose alcohol are to be able to make out, have fun with friends and relax. Is alcohol a magical potion that can make all that happen? Well, there is actually no medical proof that alcohol alone can create all the emotions and behaviours that people feel when they are drunk. It is actually the expectations of feeling exhilarated, limitless, sad, relaxed or more social that will decide if the feeling of intoxication occurs.

That means that feeling high is first and foremost a social construction and dependent on the circumstances.

Magical Potion

Blind tests clearly show that intoxication is not connected to alcohol itself but to if you believe you have been drinking alcohol or not. The research is conducted for instance by the use of blind tests in environments like a club or a bar.

The tests show “the placebo effect”. Dr Hans Olav Fekjaer from Norway explains: “Changed expectations give changed experiences”. That means that the people in the experiment who think they are drinking alcohol-free drinks are having a boring time even though there is alcohol in the drinks they are served. Those who believe they are drinking alcohol experience a drunken feeling despite the fact that they have been drinking alcohol-free drinks.

People do not become drunk on alcohol – they become drunk on the expectation. Alcohol culture and tradition is passed on from generation to generation. The learnt behaviour makes people feel drunk on their expectation. Intoxication can be seen as a hyped illusion that can feel very real – people usually have a really great time when they drink alcohol. The advertisement tricks of the alcohol industry enhance the social construction by blowing up stereotyped effects and myths concerning alcohol. It increases the expectation on the intoxication. 58% of the world’s populations always drink beverages free from alcohol according to WHO (source www.who.int). Alcohol in

itself does not create all the fun in intoxication, without its glossy image and the surroundings the drug would be uninteresting.

What is what?



How on earth can you tell what in the intoxication that comes from the drug and what comes from the expectation? Well, that is made possible by looking at the effect that the drug has:

1. in different cultures
2. in different times
3. by making blind tests

By making a comparison it is possible to see a pattern: the chemical effect of alcohol is the same in all cultures and times; the numbness of the body which leads to physical disabilities including tripping over, dropping things, vomiting, speech impediment or drowsiness. Research has not been able to prove that the chemical affects the mood.

The intoxication can in other words be divided into two parts:

1. The chemical effect that numbs the physical ability of the body
2. Learnt expectations of different feelings

Some people find the numbness both entertaining and relaxing but the vomiting and the speech impediment might not be as appealing. One of the most common reasons to get drunk is to feel free and to socialize with others. Few motivate it with a longing to vomit but rather a wish to experience the feeling of “nothing matters”.

Blind tests

Blind tests are used as a way of getting into the nitty gritty of the subject of intoxication. It is a way for the researchers to establish what is what – chemical effect of the drug and expectations on the drug. One of the most reliable ways of making blind tests is called “the Marlatt method”:

1) A number of people are divided into different groups. One group is served what they believe to be alcohol and one group believe they receive the same drink but without alcohol. The beverage used is often beer or a cocktail. One part of those who believe they are given alcohol are actually given an alcohol free beverage and one part of those who are given something alcohol free to drink are served an alcoholic beverage.

2) In order to prevent the participants from figure out the difference the beverage is poured from genuine bottles in front of them. Everyone is provided with a mouth spray so that they all have the same “taste” in the mouth. In some of the tests the participants are asked to breath into a prepared breathalyser, which shows that they have the same level of alcohol in their blood as they expect to have. The groups are put together at a party in a bar like environment. The researchers observe and measure the reactions without interfering in the activities.

3) It is always difficult to manipulate an experienced alcohol drinker. Many experiments are unrecognized by certain researchers because they do not make the situation believable enough. Alan Marlatt was very careful to create a believable situation for the

participants. Blind tests have been popular since the 1950's. That's why there is a lot of knowledge today about the actual effects of alcohol.

S/he was so drunk...



Research shows that a big part of the experience of alcohol intoxication is not due to the drug itself but a result of our expectations together with the presence of our friends and the general atmosphere. The reason for adults and youth to drink alcohol is to gain advantages. People want closeness and rituals. Alcohol has been given a strong symbol value in Sri Lanka, as well as many other countries. Some are drawn to the idea of alcohol making them a little braver, crazier, relaxed or more honest. Alcohol is often used as an excuse for actions that would not be considered acceptable under other circumstances; dancing, provocative behaviour, weird talk or crying in public. All of a sudden there is an excuse to fail or succeed. You can get away with almost anything as long as there are people around to say "Well, s/he was so drunk".

The alcohol culture has become socially accepted. In this free zone it is possible to achieve a sense of "it doesn't matter". And for some, that is worth sacrificing both the body and cash for.

Alcohol norm

For many people alcohol plays an important role in social life irrespective the fact that they consume or not. This is common in many cultures including Sri Lankan culture. Alcohol has become the life of a celebration and this is the norm passed to the younger generation.

Celebration hosts make alcohol a must-have item in the agenda just because they want to or they are being pressurized to stick to the common misconception that “alcohol is fun”. Due to this misconception, people tend to falsely believe alcohol should be the centre of attention of a celebration not the real cause that calls for a celebration.

Do you really get what you expect?

If you ask why you take alcohol, the majority would tell you that to be happy, to have fun or to have a good time. So the overall expectation of intoxication is pleasure or a positive experience of some sort. However when you dig deep to the chemical properties of alcohol, tobacco or nay other drug, they are all depressants which could only give a negative or a neutral impact. For example, the chemical effects of alcohol could be in terms of physical disabilities including tripping over, clumsiness, vomiting, drowsiness or speech impediment, which are all sorts of numbness of the body. Then the biggest question arises as to how can a depressant give you a pleasurable or a positive experience.

Negative facts – less effect

The most prominent alcohol researchers have proven that laws and restrictions make up the most effective weapon against the harm that comes from alcohol use. Alcohol policy helps keep the level of alcohol use down but information about harm, misery and prohibition will attract few. Many people can feel sympathy towards those who develop alcohol problems, but few would change their own attitude or drinking habits. In order

to see the link between alcohol as a social ritual and harm to society there is a need for a new way of thinking about prevention.

Evidence based research and statistics are really important but to only communicate negative facts will have no real effect. The alcohol norm should be exposed. Alcohol and other drugs aren't that interesting anyway, so why be square?

Propaganda is a no show

there are many examples of prevention that works the other way – they establish the myths rather than questioning them or inspire to think outside the box. One example is campaigns encouraging people to say “no” to Alcohol, tobacco or drugs. The message is underlined with the feeling that it is going to be so hard to continue to drink alcohol free drinks or quit alcohol. Young people are encouraged to resist, refrain from, say no, and decline.

Another common phenomenon is “Alcohol free parties” – for a group that to the larger part is already alcohol free. The adult organizers makes clear to all youth and kids that according to the norm a party is not alcohol free. Warnings like “Do not use alcohol, because you might end up not knowing what you are doing – anything can happen” clearly show that anything is acceptable once you are under the influence of alcohol.