Summer And Excessive Alcohol: A Risky Cocktail

Milwaukeeans certainly know how to make the most of our summer months. Once it warms up, many of us take advantage by spending the day at the beach, on a boat, attending our many festivals or simply relaxing at a backyard barbecue. The summer months may also be a particularly risky time of the year for alcohol related accidents as many of our outdoor activities include alcoholic beverages.

Excessive drinking and summer activities don’t mix. Drinking impairs both physical and mental abilities, and it also decreases our judgment, which may lead to tragic consequences on the water, on the road, and during other recreational activities.

A 2004 review of alcohol and drowning revealed that up to 70 percent of all water recreation deaths of teens and adults involve alcohol. Alcohol impairs judgment and increases risk-taking, a dangerous combination for swimmers. Even experienced swimmers may venture out farther than they should and not be able to make it back to shore, or they may not notice how chilled they’re getting and develop hypothermia. Even around a pool, too much alcohol increases accidents with deadly consequences.

According to research funded by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, alcohol may be involved in 60 percent of boating fatalities, including falling overboard. A boat operator with a blood alcohol concentration (BAC) over 0.1 percent (approximately 4 to 5 drinks) is 16 times more likely to be killed in a boating accident than an operator with zero BAC.

The summer holidays are some of the most dangerous times of the year to be on the road. When on vacation, drivers may be traveling unfamiliar routes or hauling a boat or camper. Adding alcohol to the mix puts the lives of the driver and everyone in the car, and other people on the road, at risk.

Whether you’re on the road or outdoors, heat plus alcohol can equal trouble. Hot summer days cause fluid loss through perspiration, while alcohol causes fluid loss through increased urination. Together, they can quickly lead to dehydration or heat stroke. But this doesn’t have to happen. At parties, make at least every other drink a nonalcoholic one. If you’re the host, be sure to provide plenty of cold, refreshing nonalcoholic drinks and water to keep your guests well hydrated. Have fun and be safe this summer!
Many therapies, day care centers, hospitals, and senior living facilities are using animals to help reduce anxiety, stress, and improve overall mental health.

- Pets and depression
Pets are a great motivator for people. Caring for a pet may give your day purpose, reward, and a sense of achievement. It also helps you feel valuable and needed.

Dogs especially are great at encouraging owners to get outside and be active. Fresh air elevates your mood and sunshine gives you an extra dose of Vitamin D, which helps combat depression.

Rhythmic petting or grooming of your pet releases the hormone, oxytocin, which lowers blood pressure, anxiety, and the stress hormone cortisol. Interestingly, oxytocin is often called the “cuddle hormone” or the “love hormone” because it is released when people bond through touch (snuggling/hugs). Simply sitting next to your pet allows your mind to relax, be present, and less distracted by stressful thoughts of the day.

Laughing and smiling when our pet does a funny or cute thing triggers the release of serotonin and dopamine, feel good hormones associated with happiness.

- Pets and socializing
Walking a dog often leads to conversations with other dog owners and this helps owners to stay socially connected and less withdrawn. People who have more social relationships and friendships tend to be mentally healthier.

- Pets and loneliness
A pet is a great companion. They give company, a sense of security and someone to share the routine of the day with. Pets can be especially valuable company for those later in life and living alone. Recent studies have shown a correlation between owning a pet and fewer anxious outbursts in people with Alzheimer’s.

- Pets and children with ADHD
Keeping and caring for a pet is work. Children with ADHD may benefit from the structure in taking care of a pet. Schedules such as feeding, walking and bathing, help children learn to plan and be responsible.

Pets need to play, and playing with a pet is a great way to release excess energy. Active playing is good aerobic exercise that increases oxygen-filled blood flow to a child’s brain, therefore improving their ability to concentrate and focus.

- Pets and Addiction
Pets aid in recovery because they force us to think outside of ourselves, on the needs of others, and build accountability.

Pets love unconditionally and in doing so increases our self-esteem. Pets become our confidants; they listen without judgment, even when we are not at our best.

Pets remind those in recovery of how to have fun in healthy ways. They open up the world to be enjoyed.

“There is no psychiatrist in the world like a puppy licking your face”.

Pets Improve Your Mental Health

“T’im bored!” This may be a complaint proclaimed by your children over and over throughout their summer break from school. As a parent, don’t be too quick to fill-in boredom with activities. Child psychologist, Lyn Fry purports that a bored child is not always a bad thing, “Your role as a parent is to prepare children to take their place in society. Being an adult means occupying yourself and filling up your leisure time in a way that will make you happy. If parents spend all their time filling up their child’s spare time, then the child is never going to learn to do this for themselves.”

Furthermore, being bored forces a child to use their imagination, which is crucial for developing creativity. Fry added that children “need to learn to be bored in order to motivate themselves to get things done and develop self-reliance.”

Balancing some planned activities and allowing for down time is the key.

Family friendly summer activities around Milwaukee:

- Fly a kite at the lakefront
- Visit one of the Urban Ecology Centers
- Go to Story Time at one of the Milwaukee Public Libraries
- Grab a bucket and go fishing
- Strap on skates at the Pettit National Ice Center
Anger: The Red Wolf

Anger is one of the hardest impulses to control because of its evolutionary value in defending against danger. When anger is intense, it’s very physical in how we feel it. Adrenaline gets released by the part of our brain called the amygdala; it is that rush we feel. Adrenaline signals blood flow to your hands, the heart pumps faster, our breath quickens, and pupils dilate. In this hyper-adrenalized state, anger is physically seen in our behavior also. We may raise our voice, point accusingly, give a menacing stare, grimace, flail our arms around, verbally intimidate, and get into someone’s personal space.

Anger is a hard-wired “fight-or-flight” protective response that keeps us safe from perceived danger and exploitation. While this response helped us survive as a species (i.e. not being a mountain lion’s dinner), it often gets triggered with the same intensity in other less threatening circumstances (i.e. being skipped in a shopping line).

What factors make us prone to anger? One is an accumulation of built-up stresses. A glass of water isn’t terribly heavy to hold out at arm’s length for a short time. However, that same glass of water becomes really heavy when held out for more than 15 minutes at a time. Its weight feels compounded over time and stress works the same way. Learning to recognize and cope with our feelings as we notice them is essential. Do you know when you start feeling overwhelmed before things blow-up? What are your healthy stress relievers? Do you use them?

The second factor is letting anger and resentments smolder, ruminating and holding grudges. The latest scientific research has shown that anger feeds on itself. When anger becomes chronic, a stress hormone called cortisol circulated in our body. Unlike adrenaline, cortisol stays in our system longer making it easier for us to cycle into anger over and over again. Long before our most modern brain research, there were hints of wisdom in stories and parables speaking about the importance of recognizing feelings/thoughts and letting the bad ones go.

There is a Native American Indian story about an elder speaking with a child. The elder says to the child in a very concerned voice, “My son, I have two wolves fighting in my heart. The first is the red wolf. He is fearful, angry, vengeful, envious, and resentful. The second blue wolf is compassionate, loving, generous, and peaceful.” The child excitedly asks, “Which wolf will win the fight?” The elder leans in and slowly responds, “The one I feed.” The elder leans back and adds, “That doesn’t mean we try to deny, hurt or kill the red wolf. If we did that, we’d end up in a long battle, all the while somehow making that wolf more powerful. Hating that wolf sucks strength from us. Instead, calmly pay attention to the angry wolf and let go of the belief that I have all the answers.” The elder explained, “If we can do that, both wolves end up lying down next to us, no longer an enemy. There is great power in knowing what we are feeling when we are feeling it, knowing what we are thinking when we are thinking it.”

Tips for Managing Anger

1. Think twice before you speak. We often don’t put our best foot forward when caught up in emotion. It is easy to say something you’ll regret. In “fight or flight” mode, our thinking abilities get turned down. Once calm and thinking more clearly, express concerns without aiming to hurt or control the other person.

2. Take a breath. Breathing deeply from our diaphragm helps. There is a nerve bundle that is part of our parasympathetic nervous system called the Vagus Nerve near our Solar Plexus. This nerve bundle helps regulate our stress response and breathing from our diaphragm agitates it into doing its job in managing stress.

3. Exercise. Physical activity, like a brisk walk or bike ride releases endorphins, the stress relieving hormone.

4. Avoid words such as “never” or “always.” Statements and thoughts with these words are typically negative, generalize, catastrophize and ultimately feed anger.

5. Humor. This does not suggest that you should laugh at or minimize problems. However, having perspective and finding the humor in a situation is a healthy way to cope with stress.
Happiness is elusive. It is always one step away and just beyond where we are standing. We hear it in statements like, “I’ll be happy when…if only, then I’d be happy...” Happiness often depends on circumstances that are either in the future, out of our direct control, or just out of reach. Our commercialized society fuels a need for more and the guilt of being okay with where you are at or what you have. This makes it hard for us to be content.

There is a difference between happiness and contentment. Happiness is elation. It is being hyper delighted, euphoric, ecstatic, and exhilarated. There’s no doubt that happiness is a good thing. However, it is impossible to be ecstatic all the time. Happiness is always short lived. Yet, we are constantly being pressured to be happy and do something if we are not.

Being content is an acceptance of the present. It is accepting the good and the bad that comes with it. Contentment differs from happiness in another way; it is more long term. It allows us to feel a sense of unshakable "ok-ness" and sense of wellbeing despite troubling thoughts and difficult emotions. It allows us to be fully human in experiencing all of our emotions. If you only chase happiness, it will always be one step ahead.

EAP Mission Statement

It is the mission of the Employee Assistance Program (EAP) to assist employees who develop behavioral/emotional problems that may directly affect their work performance, and to provide Key Personnel with policy and procedural guidelines for the management of these problems.

City of Milwaukee Events and Reminders

- **Not feeling well?** Visit the [Workplace Clinic](841 N. Broadway, Milwaukee, WI. 53202 (Zeidler Municipal Building) for no cost onsite health care services. Call 414-777-3413 for information or to schedule an appointment.

- **Free screening, consultation, and education services to prevent and treat potential musculoskeletal injuries.** Schedule an appointment with a physical therapist at the [Early Intervention PT Clinic](. Call 414-777-3413 to schedule an appointment.

- **Health4Me™** is a United Health Care (UHC) mobile app that provides instant access to your family’s critical health information, anytime/anywhere. Find a physician, check the status of a claim or speak directly with a healthcare professional.

Emotional First Aid

You are working in your garden and suffer a cut. What do you do? You apply First Aid: Apply pressure to the cut, flush out the wound with clean water, and bandage it. Depending on the cut, you may need professional help.

We know how to take care of physical injuries. However, we don’t always attend to emotional injuries as we would physical ones.

1) Recognize when you are in emotional pain. Just as in physical injuries, ignoring an emotional injury may only make it worse later.

2) Be patient and gentle with yourself. Watch your “self-talk”, avoid putting your self down, and don’t expect to be a superhero. Do something you enjoy and engage in self care.

3) Redefine failure. If a door closes look to open or build another one.

4) Find purpose in loss and disappointment. This is a process but involves thinking about what you could change for a better today, and a better you.