



# Effects of depressive symptoms and coping motives on naturalistic trends in negative and positive alcohol-related consequences☆



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## HIGHLIGHTS

- Both negative and positive alcohol-related consequences decreased over the course of freshman and sophomore years.
- Coping motives predicted consequences across both years, particularly at low levels of depression during sophomore year.
- Coping motives predicted average levels of negative and positive consequences across all years, with the effects of coping motives on consequences most pronounced at low levels of depression during sophomore year.

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** Depressive symptoms and drinking to cope with negative affect increase the likelihood for drinking-related negative consequences among college students. However, less is known about their influence on the naturalistic trajectories of alcohol-related consequences. In the current study, we examined how positive and negative drinking-related consequences changed as a function of depressive symptoms and drinking motives (coping, conformity, social, enhancement).

**Method:** Participants ( $N = 652$ ; 58% female) were college student drinkers assessed biweekly during the first two years of college. We used hierarchical linear modeling to examine means of and linear change in positive and negative consequences related to depression and motives, controlling for level of drinking.

**Results:** Consistent with hypotheses, negative and positive consequences decreased over the course of freshman and sophomore years. Higher levels of depression were associated with a faster decline in negative consequences during freshman year. Coping motives predicted average levels of negative and positive consequences across all years, with the effects of coping motives on consequences most pronounced at low levels of depression during sophomore year.

**Conclusions:** These findings indicate that screening students for depression and drinking to cope, independent of alcohol consumption, may help identify students at risk for experiencing negative alcohol consequences and that these factors should be addressed in targeted alcohol interventions.

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## 1. Introduction

Approximately one-third of college students are at least mildly depressed (Gress-Smith, Roubinov, Andreotti, Compas, & Luecken, 2013; for review see Ibrahim, Kelly, Adams, & Glazebrook, 2013), and data from college counseling centers show a rise in chronic and severe depression (Barr, Rando, Krylowicz, & Winfield, 2010; Gallagher, 2012).

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Factors contributing to increasing mental health issues on college campuses may include advances in treatment and the widespread use of psychotropic medication that enable students with preexisting mental health disorders to attend college, heightened academic pressures, and a lack of adaptive skills needed to adequately cope with new environments (Compton, Conway, Stinson, & Grant, 2006). Students with depressive symptoms experience substantially higher rates of drinking-related negative consequences, including alcohol use disorders, relative to non-depressed peers (Martens et al., 2008a; Miller, Miller, Verhegge, Linville, & Pumariega, 2002). However, no studies to date have prospectively examined how depressive symptoms impact trajectories of drinking-related consequences during college. Gaining a perspective on the natural history of alcohol-related consequences and exploring how these outcomes differ by known factors of alcohol risk

(e.g., depression) will inform targeted intervention and health promotion efforts.

### 1.1. Depressive symptoms and drinking to cope

The motivational model of alcohol use (Cox & Klinger, 1988, 1990) posits that motivation for drinking is a necessary prerequisite and the most proximal predictor of alcohol consumption. In accordance with theory, one's decision to drink rests in the expected affective outcomes of drinking. From a clinical perspective, understanding how motives contribute to drinking behaviors during potentially risky transitions to college can inform avenues for modifying students' motives for high-risk drinking. Of all motives (social, enhancement, coping, conformity), drinking to cope with negative affect is the strongest predictor of drinking-related negative consequences among college students (Kuntsche, Knibbe, Gmel, & Engels, 2005; Kuntsche, Stewart, & Cooper, 2008), and students reporting higher coping motives are found to experience higher levels of negative consequences (e.g., impaired control, academic/occupational problems, physiological dependence) one year later (Merrill, Wardell, & Read, 2014).

Consuming alcohol to cope with distress or to escape problems appears to play a fundamental role in the drinking decisions of students with depressive symptoms (Holt et al., 2013; Martens et al., 2008b). Kenney, Jones, and Barnett (2015) found that endorsement of drinking to cope with negative affect (both in the year prior to and during the first year of college) was a primary mechanism through which depressed mood at college entry predicted women's experience of negative alcohol consequences during college. However, results from fixed-interval (e.g., daily diary) and time-to-drink (e.g., drinking sooner in the week) approaches examining the moderating role of global drinking to cope motives in the relationship between negative affect and drinking have been inconsistent. While some studies demonstrate that students with higher drinking to cope motives drank earlier in weeks (Armeli, Todd, Conner, & Tennen, 2008) and more on days (Mohr et al., 2005) associated with negative moods, other studies fail to demonstrate moderating effects (Armeli, Conner, Cullum, & Tennen, 2010; Littlefield, Talley, & Jackson, 2012; O'Hara, Armeli, & Tennen, 2014). Still, it is not known how depression and coping motives influence *prospective trends* in consequences during college or how depressive status and coping motives may interact to predict trends in consequences. Identifying how depressive status and drinking to cope are associated with trajectories of risk during this critical developmental period will more broadly explicate trends in risk and provide valuable implications for targeted intervention.

### 1.2. Trends in negative and positive consequences

Overall, students experience a peak in alcohol-related negative consequences in the first year of college (O'Neill, Parra, & Sher, 2001), after which negative consequences decline (Hustad, Carey, Carey, & Maisto, 2009; Schulenberg et al., 2001). Declining trends may be due to an initial ceiling effect in which students tend to experience the most extreme risk during the transition to college, which naturally declines thereafter. Still, although students appear to learn to drink more safely over time, reductions are not sharp and associated risks continue to remain extreme relative to the general population. Further, although negative consequences exhibit general declines overall, this is not the case for all students; therefore, identifying risk factors associated with less decline is needed to benefit students facing heightened risk.

Positive alcohol-related consequences (e.g., feeling more self-confident and sure of self, easier to socialize) receive less attention in research than negative consequences even though positive consequences are more strongly endorsed (Corbin, Morean, & Benedict, 2008; Park, Armeli, & Tennen, 2004) and are as strongly predictive of students' future drinking behaviors and intentions to drink (Lee, Maggs, Neighbors, & Patrick, 2011; Park et al., 2004; Usala, Celio, Lisman, Day,

& Spear, 2015). Because the motivational model of alcohol use focuses on drinkers' desire to achieve positive outcomes, assessing how motives for drinking predict positive drinking-related consequences will provide a more comprehensive understanding of students' drinking-related trajectories. To our knowledge, only one study, using data from the current sample, examined trends in both negative and positive consequences. This study revealed declines in both types of consequences over the course of the first year of college, but did not explore moderators of these trends or whether similar declines occurred in sophomore year (Barnett et al., 2014).

Gaining a better understanding of prospective alcohol outcomes is particularly important for at-risk students experiencing depressed mood who may rely on alcohol for its rewarding effects, and therefore may perceive greater benefits from drinking. In fact, negative affect among college students is associated with greater experience of both negative and positive consequences (Park & Grant, 2005; Park & Levenson, 2002), indicating that positive experiences may reinforce risky drinking behaviors despite negative experiences. In Kenney et al.'s (2015) longitudinal study, women matriculating into college with (versus without) depressed mood exhibited steeper declines in negative alcohol-related consequences during the first year of college despite stable drinking levels and depressive symptoms, and higher overall negative consequences. Building on this prior work, the current study examined how naturalistic rates of change in students' negative and positive consequences differed as a function of depressed mood and drinking motives (known predictors of alcohol risk) over the course of freshman and sophomore years.

### 1.3. Study aims and objectives

Using data from a large multi-site sample of students who completed biweekly assessments during each of the first two years of college, we first tested the hypothesis that the frequency of both positive and negative consequences would decline across each of the first two years. Second, we tested the hypothesis that students reporting stronger levels of drinking to cope with negative affect would exhibit lower rates of change in consequences relative to peers (i.e., their frequency of negative and positive consequences would remain more constant and/or decline less rapidly). Given inconsistencies between recent empirical findings (showing faster declines in the frequency of negative consequences among depressed students) and cross-sectional literature that finds substantially greater alcohol risk among depressed students, we examined trends by depressive status without a hypothesis. Third, we predicted that participants reporting higher (versus lower) levels of depressed mood and higher (versus lower) coping motives would experience more positive and negative consequences, on average, across the course of two years. Finally, we tested the hypothesis that coping motives would moderate the relationship between depressed mood and consequences, such that higher endorsement of drinking to cope should be particularly risk enhancing (i.e., result in higher average frequency of negative consequences across the two years) for depressed participants.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were 652 incoming college students in a two-year longitudinal study assessing naturalistic changes in drinking-related beliefs and behaviors. The present study sample had a mean age of 18.37 years ( $SD = 0.45$ ) at baseline and was 58% female. Racial composition was: 67% White, 9% Asian, 6% African American, 0.3% Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, 0.2% Native Hawaiian or Alaska Native, 11% Multiracial, and 7% unknown/other. Additionally, 7% reported Hispanic ethnicity.

In the larger study from which these data were drawn, 1053 participants were enrolled across three consecutive years (2004–2006) from

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