

Why (some) people drown their sorrows

July 28, 2010

Imagine that you just lost your job. The bad news came without warning—a company downsizing. You're one more casualty of the recession. So naturally you're feeling lousy, and what's more, you need to go home and tell the family. But maybe, before you do, you'll stop by your favorite watering hole for a martini—or two or three. You've got the time, after all.

That's called drowning your sorrows—or, in psychological jargon, self-medication. It's quite normal, really, to try to regulate intense negative emotions in whatever way possible, and liquor is a quick and effective strategy. But it's not a healthy strategy—and the fact is, not everyone does it. While some of us turn to alcohol or drugs to cope with life's curveballs, others seem to muddle through their travails in other ways.

So what's the difference between those who use booze to cope and those who don't? What's going on in the mind of your co-worker, who also got a pink slip but drives right past the tavern? Doesn't he feel bad, too?

No doubt he does, but new research suggests that you and your co-worker may have very different cognitive styles—different ways of appraising the same blunt negative emotions. While you may know that you feel “bad” and leave it at that, others may parse that global negativity: I feel angry at the boss; disappointed in myself; scared for my family. Simply knowing that one feels bad is not very useful, but more precise and fine-grained analysis conveys a richer understanding of bad feelings—and that understanding may actually lower risk of using (and abusing) alcohol as a coping mechanism.

At least that's the theory, which George Mason University psychological scientist Todd Kashdan has been testing out in the lab. He suspected that people who are unskilled at differentiating their bad feelings would be more likely to dwell on those feelings and misinterpret them—making them worse—and that this would lead to self-medication. Here's how he tested that idea.

He recruited a large group of social drinkers from the community, and had them monitor their drinking for three weeks using a hand-held electronic diary. They also kept track of their emotions during this time, recording when something made them feel angry or fatigued or anxious or distracted—and rating the intensity of those emotions. They did this when they were randomly prompted, and they also paid special attention to their feelings right before and after drinking. Kashdan used all this data to rate all the volunteers on how coarsely or finely they analyzed their emotions.

The idea was to see if those who were more precise in analyzing their own emotions were also less apt to drown their sorrows. And they were, clearly. As reported in the journal *Psychological Science*, those with intense negative emotions during the three weeks drank less if they thought about those feelings in more nuanced ways. It appears that people who can deconstruct their bad feelings in times of distress have more self-understanding—making it easier to manage problems and plan real coping strategies—not

just numbing.

Wray Herbert's book, [*On Second Thought: Outsmarting Your Mind's Hard-Wired Habits*](#), will be [published by Crown in September](#). Excerpts from the "We're Only Human" blog appear regularly in *The Huffington Post* and *Scientific American Mind*.