

The last thing you're probably thinking about when you get on the road after hanging out with your friends on a Friday night is if you will encounter a drunk driver or not. Unless talking about prom night or project graduation, I know I personally don't consider the fact that 33% of people are involved in a drunk driving accident sometime during their life, or that 37% of fatal crashes are caused by drunk drivers. Between the norepinephrine hijacking your brain and social reassurances that you will get home safe, it's no wonder that so many people continue to drink and drive regardless of the dangers it poses to other people and themselves.

Even though people may not intend to drive drunk and may understand the dangers, your brain can influence you to drive under the influence regardless. Alcohol increases our levels of norepinephrine and GABA, neurotransmitters that help to explain the effects of drinking. Norepinephrine is responsible for our body's arousal, which can lead to people being more impulsive and doing things without considering potential consequences. GABA, on the other hand, relaxes one and decreases stress. Being impulsive and relaxed leads to a dangerous combination and leads people to drive, especially younger drinkers as they want to act in the moment and not worry about the fact they are driving drunk. As a teenager, you are already impulsive, and altering your neurotransmitters only makes you more of a danger to yourself and others when on the road. Not only are neurotransmitters levels altered with alcohol, but there is also decreased activity in the prefrontal cortex of our brain, which is responsible for rational thoughts and decision making. All of these are happening at once in our brain, and drunk driving can be a result of it. Understanding how our brain reacts to alcohol is important in the process of preventing drunk driving and unnecessary deaths.

In addition to brain chemistry, peer pressure also raises the chances of driving under the influence. When drinking in social situations, people may be inclined to drink more, even if not explicitly pressured too. If all your friends order another drink, normative social influence will lead you to follow suit. Normative social influence results from wanting to gain approval from those around you, and regardless of if you are with close friends or acquaintances, people want to conform and fit in. Teenagers and young adults especially feel this peer pressure to fit in, as they are already self-conscious of what others think of them. I know that I always feel pressured to fit in, as I don't want other teenagers to think I'm weird and that I don't belong. This fear often drives my actions, even if it is something as small as choosing not to raise my hand during class.

Drinking more is not the only way friends negatively influence choices with alcohol. In the absence of a designated driver, there may be a greater social influence to drive anyway, as the group still needs to get home. However, with other options becoming more prevalent, social conformity shouldn't be an excuse to drive drunk.

At the end of the day, there is no excuse to drive drunk. By doing so you put yourself and others in danger, which could easily be avoided by choosing a designated driver or using a ride service like Uber or Lyft. When you start drinking, you may convince yourself that you will be able to have self-control over how much you consume and your actions, but as seen above biological factors and social pressures are difficult (if not impossible) to avoid. The easiest way to prevent drunk driving is simply not to drink, but it is the least likely to happen. If you choose to drink-which is illegal for people under the age of 21- at least make sure you have a firm plan set in place to avoid harming others. Designating a friend to remain sober and make sure no one goes on the road is most ideal, but if needed you can pay a few extra dollars to Uber home. Sure, you have to spend extra money, but by doing so you ensure that you will not harm anyone through drunk driving. At the end of the day, if a teenager wants to drink they will find a way. To better prevent drunk driving, there should be a greater focus on educating teenagers about what happens to their brains when they drink. This would help give reason and explanation as to why drunk driving is dangerous. Most of us are unaware of what alcohol does to our brains and we only know that there are certain side-effects of drinking. Stubborn young adults would rather be told the "why" behind something compared to just being told, "drunk driving is bad, don't do it." Appealing to logic and teaching them makes a much more compelling argument. Education is more powerful than ignorance when fighting drunk driving, and we need to be proactive rather than retroactive when considering the influence of alcohol.

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