

Annie Grace: This is Annie Grace and you're listening to this Naked Mind Podcast where without judgment, pain or rules, we explore the role of alcohol in our lives and culture.

Annie Grace: Today, I am answering reader's questions. I have a question from John, John, very succinctly, he goes, "Annie, why is it that everybody says that alcohol is a depressant when it feels to me like alcohol actually makes me happy, and I see that for a lot of people, so I don't understand why it's classified as a depressant."

Annie Grace: It's really such a good question, John, because there's one thing, alcohol is an interesting substance in that it's both a stimulant and a depressant. The key thing to understand about this is what's happening inside your body if your blood alcohol content or BAC, the levels of alcohol in your blood, is rising or if it's falling.

Annie Grace: Here's what happens. You have a drink and for the first 30 minutes after you have the drink, so one drink equals 30 minutes of blood alcohol content rising, so your BAC is arising. The rising in your blood alcohol content releases endorphins, it artificially stimulates your pleasure center, which sounds like a great thing but we'll get a bit to why that's not such a good thing in a minute. It makes you feel slightly euphoric, it makes you feel good, it's that tipsy feeling, it's that feeling that hooks us.

Annie Grace: Here's what happens, as soon as the blood alcohol content rises for half an hour it starts to fall. Your body says, "Whoa, whoa, wait a second. I need to process this alcohol, I want it out of the system," so it starts to process it out and your blood alcohol content as your body becomes more and more efficient in processing alcohol, it falls. One 30 minute rise in blood alcohol equals a two to three hour fall of blood alcohol so you're basically trading 30 minutes of those nice feelings for two to three hours of not feeling great.

Annie Grace: You might be asking, "Well, why would anybody ever drink ever, that makes absolutely no sense." Here's what happens. Your blood alcohol rises, it starts to fall. Guess what? You feel a desperate need for another drink. You're "Oh, okay," and that's why you order another drink, it's one of the main reasons. I had somebody tell me recently, she's like, "It's always the second glass of wine I like the best."

Annie Grace: Well, the pleasure in the second glass of wine isn't just the stimulation but it's also you're overcoming the fall that the first glass of wine put into your body. You have another drink to keep your blood alcohol rising, and you can keep your blood alcohol rising through the night, half an hour per drink through the night. At some point though, when your blood alcohol content gets high enough, you cease feeling those nice feelings.

Annie Grace: What you end up feeling is just unhappy feelings anyway, and that's at a certain threshold. That's why we have angry people who are drunk. We have weepy drunks, we have sad drunks, it's because that rising does not go infinitely. Now, if you're just drinking and you're not getting really drunk, you say, "Well, why don't I notice this?"

Annie Grace: Here's the reason. Most often people start drinking after work or in the evening, they keep their blood alcohol rising for a period of time, and then they sleep through the falling. Now, what happens when your blood alcohol content is falling? You start to feel depressed, anxious, nervous. Your body actually releases adrenaline and cortisol so if you are drinking to relieve stress, those very things you're drinking to relieve are compounded because your body is releasing stress hormones directly into your body. You're basically trading a half an hour of the stimulant effect for two to three hours of the depressant effect.

Annie Grace: The thing is, we normally sleep through this time. We wake up the next morning, we don't feel great, we feel a little worse than before but we don't connect it with the drinks because it's many hours have passed. We just assume we have low energy, we're not feeling great, and we just don't connect it. By the end of the day we're certainly looking forward to our next drink to get that blood alcohol content rising again.

Annie Grace: Now, there's two other quick things I want to say about this, one is just a really personal thing for me. When I was drinking over the years, I'd spent 17 years on different types of depressants, anti-depressants, because I really suffered from depression. During the last 10 years of my drinking, it was at its heaviest and I was on three different types of anti-depressant medication. I was on Xanax for anxiety, I was on Escitalopram and Wellbutrin, and those things were just kind of barely making me hang in there.

Annie Grace: The thing that happened that was incredible is within one year only of stopping drinking, of eliminating alcohol from my life, I stopped feeling this decade of depression and I was able to, with the help of my doctor, get off all three of those medications and I've been off of those medications for over two years now so it's been absolutely phenomenal.

Annie Grace: You say, "Okay, alcohol truly is a depressant," and in my case it was causing so much depression in my life, and it is this chicken and the egg thing, are you drinking because you're depressed anyway and then you're trying to self-medicate it, which, by the way, makes it always worse. Or are you becoming depressed because you're drinking and alcohol is releasing these stress hormones in your body as your body tries to counteract the alcohol. That's the first thing I wanted to say about this.

Annie Grace: The other thing that I wanted to say is really interesting. I talked at the very beginning of this about how alcohol artificially stimulates your pleasure center, and this sounds like a great thing. Like, "Oh great, well something I can just drink and it's going to make me feel all these artificially amazing feelings." What

happens is your brain is such a delicate organism, it is constantly trying to maintain homeostasis so in an effort alcohol shoots up artificially at levels that normal pleasures can't achieve; things like reading a book, having sex, sitting down to a good meal, enjoying the company of your loved ones.

Annie Grace: It shoots up your pleasure center, artificially stimulates it. Your brain says, "Whoa, whoa, whoa, too much, too much," and your brain knocks that pleasure back down. How that happens is it releases a chemical called dynorphin. Dynorphin is basically the opposite of endorphins and it knocks back down that pleasure and so you go up and then you come back down, dynorphin is released.

Annie Grace: The thing that happens when you're drinking all the time, so every single night, is that those levels of dynorphin become ever present in your body. Here's the most terrifying thing, is that over time you can't really numb selectively so the dynorphin is numbing the alcohol's increased pleasure effect but it ends up numbing pleasure from other experiences as well. This is why people end up not having fun when they're not drinking because they have so much dynorphin in their body that the things that used to be really fun ...

Annie Grace: We all remember a time, even if you have to look back to childhood, we all remember a time where we could relax, laugh really hard, have a really good time without alcohol. That time can feel really far away because when you try to do stuff without alcohol you have this increased level of dynorphin and it's knocking down your body's ability to feel pleasure, and that happens over time with regular drinking.

Annie Grace: The great news is that it comes back. Again, not only do I have the personal story of getting off anti-depressants to such a great degree, but equally just emotionally, I feel something that I don't know that I've felt in my entire adult life. It's joy, it's true, real, unadulterated joy, not just giggly tipsy at the bar giddiness, it is deep, profound, thick joy, belly laugh-type joy, and that is something that I just didn't have when I was constantly drinking.

Annie Grace: I know that that's true for so many readers so, John, it's such a good question. Alcohol is a depressant but it's also a stimulant. That, unfortunately, is what can hook so many of us, myself included.

Annie Grace: Thank you so much. Again, this is Annie Grace, author of *This Naked Mind*. Control alcohol, find freedom, discover happiness, and change your life. Thank you so much for another great question.

Annie Grace: Hi. Are you looking to connect with like minded people? Sometimes maybe you feel like as someone who knows all this information from *This Naked Mind* or the alcohol experiment, that you're living in a world of muggles and people just don't speak your language. That is why I created *The Exchange*.

Annie Grace: The Exchange is an online community where we meet face-to-face, live video calls multiple times a week with people from all over the globe, just to connect, to have some where you're seen and you're heard and you feel less alone, and really that you can give back and get the support you need.

Annie Grace: If this sounds great to you, check it out at thisnakedmind.com/exchange. As always, rate, review, and subscribe to this podcast as it truly helps the message reach somebody who might need to hear it today.