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# Nothing to do

## The relationship between 'leisure boredom' and alcohol and drug addiction: Is there a link to youth suicide in rural Australia?

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**R**URAL Australia has one of the highest rates of youth suicide in the world. In many cases, the suicide of a young adult living in a rural setting, or an unsuccessful attempt of the act, has been attributed to drug and alcohol usage. Such behaviour may also be related to other factors, such as depression, boredom and social isolation, which may have consequences for the motivational behaviour of the individual. Considered together, these issues suggest that the relationship between leisure boredom, intrinsic motivation and the level of drug and alcohol use by young adults living in a rural setting may be a worthy area for further research.

### Youth suicide in Australia

Australia has a disproportionately high suicide rate for young people. Over the past 20 years the rate of male youth

suicide has doubled, and the suicide rate for the 15 to 24 age group is now higher than the combined death rate for motor vehicle accidents and AIDS (Baume & Clinton 1997). In addition, between 1964 and 1993, there were constant increases in the male suicide rates in almost all rural areas of Australia, with the sharpest increases occurring in smaller rural and inland areas (Baume & Clinton 1997).

Baume and Clinton (1997) suggested that both structural and personal vulnerability were the main contributing factors to youth suicide. Structural factors refer here to declining populations and restricted employment opportunities in rural areas; the media representation of suicides; the greater availability of the means of lethal self-harm in rural communities; and problems in accessing and using mental health

services. Personal vulnerability factors include the effect of a recent or significant loss and/or family turmoil.

The Australian Government responded to these disturbing figures by announcing increased funding of \$19 million, to establish a National Youth Suicide Strategy over the period 1996–97 and 1998–99. Most of this money has been allocated to rural and regional youth counselling services and to Kids Help Line, a non-profit youth counselling service. These funds are in addition to the \$13 million over four years which has been allocated for the Youth Suicide Prevention Initiative 'Here for Life' program.

### Mental health problems of young people

In an American study, Babor and his fellow researchers (1991) reported that over 12% of children and youth suffer from mental disorders, many of which are associated with drug and alcohol use. Substance abuse has also been implicated in increased rates of suicide, violence and homicide (Hanson & Venturelli 1995). In a study comparing the prevalence of substance abuse among American Year 12 students in rural and urban communities, Cronk and Sarvela (1997) found, that in 1976, subjects in urban schools had a greater prevalence for most substances; however, by 1992, usage in

*This review of recent research in regard to young adults and adolescents suggests that there may be a causal link between leisure boredom and high-risk health behaviours such as substance abuse as well as various forms of mental distress. The findings support the hypothesis that adolescents and young adults who perceive their leisure to be unsatisfying, or in some way incomplete, may be at greater risk of engaging in patterns of leisure behaviour which are detrimental to their physical and/or psychological well-being.*

both groups of students was similar, although rural students had a higher prevalence for both alcohol and cigarette use.

A recent study of over 10,000 Australians aged 18 and over, reported that 27% of those aged between 18 and 24 had had a mental disorder in the previous six months, with the prevalence decreasing with age to 6% among those aged 65 and older (Australian Bureau of Statistics 1998). American figures for disorders in the younger age range are lower than these ABS figures. A smaller study by Waters, coordinator of the Public Health Unit at the Royal Melbourne Children's Hospital was recently reported in the *Weekend Australian* (Ferrari, 16-17/5/98, 'Review' p.29). Waters surveyed 2,360 secondary school students throughout Victoria aged between 11 and 18. The most common concerns cited by 40% of teenagers were feelings of depression, while 37% were worried about their weight, one in three had self-confidence problems, and a similar proportion had difficulties falling or staying asleep. By 18, more than four out of 10 boys had feelings of depression, and one in three were concerned about their self-confidence.

In Australia, it has been estimated that 70% of all people who suicide have a known depressive disorder (Burrows 1995). Yellowlees and

Kaushik (1992) concluded that there is a causal relationship between overuse of drugs (particularly cannabis) and alcohol, and depressive symptoms. These researchers examined psychiatric health problems in the far western region of NSW in and around Broken Hill between the years 1986 and 1990, and found that:

*... alcohol abuse was very common in rural NSW particularly in men, concluding that this is probably related, in part at least, to the high rates of domestic violence and sexual abuse in women and children ... In addition, there was a higher rate of depressive disorders and bipolar disorders than in the Australia-wide comparison (Yellowlees & Kaushik 1992, p.197).*

Lawrence and Williams (1990) also reported that people living in rural areas consumed 30% more alcohol than their urban counterparts.

Several researchers have reported high levels of alcohol consumption among young people in rural areas of Australia. In a longitudinal study of over 6,000 adolescents in the Hunter Valley (NSW), Raphael (1989) found that the typical amount of alcohol drunk at one sitting by 14- to 16-year-olds was 60 grams (the equivalent of six standard drinks). This amount is defined as hazardous drinking by the National Health and Medical Research

Commission guidelines. It has also been well documented that men are more likely than women to consume hazardous quantities of alcohol and illicit drugs (Commonwealth Dept of Human Services & Health 1996). In addition, this research also concluded that men are more likely to combine this with other high-risk physical activities such as driving, violent behaviour or unprotected sexual activity. A recent report by the Gilmour Centre in Wagga Wagga (Alcohol and Drug Foundation Qld 1999) suggests that alcohol and drug problems are common in rural areas, but that they continue to remain hidden from political view and therefore do not attract adequate resources. The report also focuses attention on the need for further research, training and assessment of drug and alcohol services in rural and remote areas.

Male sex-role stereotyping may be another factor contributing to alcohol and drug abuse in rural areas because it helps reinforce the macho male role and channels adolescent males into competitive and aggressive behaviours. Australian literary traditions have propagated the myths of these masculine virtues in rural settings (Clark 1962). At the same time, they have taught young males to devalue emotional expression while encouraging high levels of alcohol consumption (Patience 1993).

Thus, research indicates that there

is a relationship between factors such as depression, excessive alcohol consumption, drug abuse and suicidal tendencies among young males in rural areas of Australia. However, one factor which has been largely ignored by academics and journalists alike is the concept of leisure boredom. This factor may contribute to depression and alcohol and drug abuse in rural communities, and its presence may be a precursor to youth suicide.

### **Leisure boredom**

Boredom has been conceptualised as a state of under-stimulation, under-arousal, lack of momentum or a lack of psychological involvement associated with dissatisfaction in the task situation (Brissett & Snow 1993; Larson & Richards 1991). In overseas research, adolescents have reported high levels of boredom in school but also out of school and in leisure situations (Caldwell, Smith & Weissinger 1992). In interviews with Canadian high school students, Shaw, Caldwell and Kleiber (1996) found that 31.9% reported boredom in school and 30% stated that they were also bored out of school. In addition, there was a tendency for male students to report boredom more often than female students. Sundays were mentioned more than other days as "boring" and this was associated with having nothing to do, no friends around, nowhere to go, or a lack of transport. Evenings during the week were also mentioned as times that could be boring, particularly when sitting at home watching television.

Iso-Ahola and Weissinger (1987) concluded that a lack of leisure skills, combined with restricted leisure opportunities are likely to cause feelings of boredom in leisure which may give rise to delinquency and drug use in free time. In a later article, Iso-Ahola and Weissinger (1990) defined leisure boredom as:

*The subjective perception that available leisure experiences are*

*not sufficient to instrumentally satisfy needs for optimal arousal ... leisure experiences are not sufficiently frequent, involving, exciting, varied or novel (p.5).*

### **Leisure boredom and alcohol and drug abuse**

American studies have found that leisure boredom is related to detrimental behaviours such as delinquency, extreme sensation activity and alcohol and drug abuse (Caldwell & Smith 1995). In regard to alcohol usage, Orcutt (1984) reported a positive correlation between susceptibility to boredom and both frequency and quantity of alcohol use among female college students. For males, he found that only interpersonal forms of boredom (such as boredom with others) were correlated with the quantity of alcohol consumed. In regard to drug abuse, Smith-Peterson (1983) posited that when communities offered limited recreational opportunities, individuals sought to reduce boredom through substance abuse which became a major form of recreational activity.

Rancourt (1991) examined motivations and expectancies associated with drug and alcohol use. She found that the most important motivation for substance use was the need to relieve boredom by seeking out a stimulating sensation. Changes included improvement in mood, enjoying oneself more and, with alcohol consumption, finding things more pleasurable (Baum-Baiker 1985).

Therefore, it can be inferred from the research that there is a positive relationship between leisure involvement and drinking alcohol, especially among adolescents (Carruthers 1993). While it is true that drinking creates effects that contribute to enjoying oneself, there are often negative consequences as well. Carruthers and Hood (1994) warn that individuals need to learn alternative means of achieving desired leisure outcomes without the use of alcohol.

Iso-Ahola and Crowley (1991) concluded from their research that substance abusers were more likely than non-substance abusers to experience leisure as boredom. Thus it can be argued that substance abusers with high levels of leisure boredom seek to achieve higher levels of arousal and, therefore, are more likely to decrease leisure boredom through the use of illicit substances. There is also evidence to suggest that substance abusers are more likely to be sensation seekers and have a low tolerance for repetitious or constant experiences (Zuckerman 1978). In order to satisfy their need for optimum arousal, substance abusers pursue leisure but become more easily bored with it because of their personality disposition. If leisure fails to provide enough stimulation, they may turn to illicit drug use and/or anti-social behaviour (Weissinger 1995).

### **Leisure boredom and alcohol and drug abuse in rural Australia**

A Select Committee on Youth Affairs (Western Australia Legislative Assembly 1992) devoted a large section of their report to leisure and recreation. The committee was particularly concerned about the lack of programs and facilities offering young people challenge and risk-taking opportunities:

*Because of the lack of facilities and programs, and the resulting boredom, these young people often congregate in public places where they are often involved in illegal or antisocial activities (Western Australia Legislative Assembly 1992, p.32).*

Jones (1992) interviewed 30 women aged between 15 and 20 in rural Tasmania. The most common response to the question "What is it like to be a young woman growing up in the country?" was "There is nothing to do". The local community offered



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few recreational facilities to cater for the interests of young women, especially those who were not sports minded. As Susan, aged 15, expressed it, "Boys see their friends at sports like football and cricket but girls don't have anything" (Jones 1992, p.4).

However, one major leisure activity that was discussed as common for young people is called "blockies". This involves driving continuously around the same block in a car with between one and five occupants. Most nights (particularly at the weekends) the streets of many country towns and regional cities reverberate with a procession of cars circling the same acknowledged route. "The sounds of revving engines and screeching tyres, and yelling through open car windows shatters the night" (Jones 1992, p.5).

Doing "blockies" permits youth to "muck around", and engage in unstructured social interactions which characterise teenage peer relations. It is seen as a symbolic and subcultural activity. Alcohol and other drugs do not significantly feature in the "blockies" ritual. Because youth are prone to police harassment, and many of the drivers are holders of "P" plates, the use of alcohol is not viable. However, for those who are old enough to legally enter pubs and discos, the appeal of "blockies" soon diminishes.

In another study, Bone, Cheers and Hil (1993) investigated the needs of 108 young people aged between 12 and 18. These young people lived in the rural community of Proserpine and

Whitsunday Township, as well as smaller satellite communities in northern Queensland. The researchers found that there was an incorrect perception that young people in this area were well catered for in terms of access to recreation and leisure facilities, and that they also experienced the benefits of living in a desirable, hedonistic and even luxurious environment.

However, the young people reported experiencing a deep sense of boredom, alienation and marginalisation that rendered them vulnerable to a number of personal and social difficulties. One 17-year-old respondent stated, "There's not much to do ... no jobs ... everything requires money ... it's a boring place ... no privacy" (Bone, Cheers & Hil 1993, p.2). The problems mentioned most frequently included emotional and social upheaval following family breakdown and/or discord, excessive use of alcohol and/or drugs and strained relationships with local police. Other problems which were frequently mentioned were boredom, transportation, accommodation and education-related problems.

Travel in rural areas for recreation and social contact has been highlighted as costly because of the distances involved and the lack of public transport options (Green & McDonald 1996). In a study of 276 young people in the provincial Victorian city of Ballarat, Green and McDonald (1996) found that over half

of the subjects commented that the cost of public transport was a deterrent to participating in recreation activities. The authors concluded that:

*... the paucity of buses at nights and weekends, combined with the high costs of taxis both within the provincial city and to smaller townships, is a major problem for young people. This limits their social and recreational opportunities and may add to rural isolation* (Green & McDonald 1996, p.42).

In other words, access to suitable entertainment, recreation and sporting facilities was severely restricted in rural areas. Adults and young people identified the need for alcohol-free entertainment facilities – especially youth-specific discotheques, recreation and sporting facilities and relatively low-cost leisure equipment such as for skate-boarding.

*Our clear impression was that young people in the shire lacked "social space" or acceptable places where they could congregate away from intrusions by people from other age groups* (Bone, Cheers & Hil 1993, p.5).

### **Positive leisure as a deterrent to alcohol and drug abuse**

There is a growing body of knowledge to support the assertion that leisure is an important context for young people in terms of identity formation (Kelly 1990; Evans & Poole 1991). In addition, different types of leisure

settings have been found to provide opportunities for people to select behaviours that provide intrinsic rewards. Deci and Ryan (1985) suggested the existence of three personality orientations (autonomy, control & interpersonal) that influence behavioural choices. In relation to leisure, the autonomy orientation is characterised by a tendency to seek out opportunities to be in control of the individual's environment as well as by behaviours that are linked to the individual's leisure competence and self-determination.

Several studies have supported the use of positive leisure experiences to assist the individual's interpersonal interactions, sense of control and social skills. Hawkins and Catalano (1985) reported that involvement in active leisure activities showed a consistent positive relationship to reduced drug and alcohol use. In addition, physical activity and exercise have been shown to be beneficial in the treatment of substance abusers (Murray 1986). Kunstler (1992) concluded that leisure activities helped substance abusers to learn to experience fun and pleasure by providing opportunities for novelty and feelings of control, while at the same time giving immediate and concrete feedback. Sneegas (1989) argued that social skills which encouraged trust and cooperation can be best developed through recreation participation. Kunstler (1992) also concluded that when clients in substance abuse programs were exposed to leisure alternatives they were more likely to participate in positive recreation opportunities after discharge.

These studies suggest that participation in positive leisure activities where the adolescent has the freedom to choose, and feels in control, can help to reduce alcohol and drug abuse. Is this the case in rural Australia? Again, Bone, Cheers and Hil (1993) in their northern Queensland study recommended that the shire develop a

youth entertainment, recreation and sporting infrastructure as quickly as possible. This was seen as especially important and urgently required because of the high level of youth unemployment, and the large amount of free time that many local youth appeared to have.

## Conclusion

This review of the literature examines the relationship between leisure boredom, and alcohol and drug abuse among young people, particularly those in rural areas of Australia. Research supports the hypothesis that youth (especially young males) living in rural areas experience high levels of leisure boredom and have a greater propensity to drink large quantities of

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alcohol, resulting in feelings of alienation and marginalisation that often render them vulnerable to depression and suicide.

Several studies, however, have supported the importance of positive leisure experiences, where adolescents experience higher levels of intrinsic motivation which assist in developing interpersonal contacts, a sense of control and social skills. This is in contrast to situations of leisure boredom which are often associated with young people's consumption of large quantities of alcohol and/or drug abuse. Thus, the literature supports the suggestion that participation in positive leisure activities where the adolescent has the freedom to choose, and gains

feelings of control, generally leads to a reduction in alcohol consumption and drug abuse. Yoder (1990) found that individuals recovering from chemical dependency indicated that, in recovery, they have "... more time to play, to paint, to write, to plant flowers, and to make music" (p.5). Opportunities for these experiences can only be achieved through recreation and leisure services.

Based on this review, research could be developed to compare the links between leisure boredom and excessive drinking of alcohol among young people in both rural and urban areas of Australia. This study could hypothesise that youth living in rural areas experience higher levels of leisure boredom and, consequently, have a greater propensity to drink larger quantities of alcohol. This has been suggested as a contributing factor to depression and suicide, particularly for young males living in rural areas. The sample population might consist of senior high school students living in rural and urban areas of Queensland. A quantitative measure of leisure boredom, the "Leisure Boredom Scale" has been developed and tested successfully in the USA by two American leisure researchers, Iso-Ahola and Weissinger (1987), and has high reliability and validity measures. Additional measurement scales for the dependent variables of alcohol consumption and depressive symptoms would also be required. Finally, to gain deeper insights into this problem, qualitative questions should also be included in such a study.

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