

Intoxication: Myopia for the Psyche

This issue is written in especially large type for the convenience of our myopic readers

Something about intoxication must be highly rewarding, because otherwise intelligent individuals pay a dear price to experience it. Intoxication is rewarding for precisely the same reason it produces suffering - it forces one to focus on the here and now, and thereby releases one from the inhibiting influence of remote stimuli.

The Attention Allocation Model proposed by Steele and Josephs¹ suggests that intoxication produces myopia - shortsightedness, blindness to distant stimuli. Intoxication reduces cognitive capacity, thereby limiting attention to the immediate environment. Remote stimuli such as moral concerns or fear of consequences do not get processed, and so are not available to exert an inhibitory influence. Not held back by these inhibitory influences the intoxicated person's behavior is released - disinhibited.

This shortsightedness, also known as Alcohol Induced Myopia, has benefits in some circumstances, for example

moderate drinking - blood alcohol levels [BAL] below 0.06 - may improve the social performance of an inhibited person. On the other hand, intoxication - especially when associated with BAL greater than 0.08 can release behavior that causes irreversible harm. Indeed, intoxication is implicated in 65% of murders, 88% of knifings, 65% of spouse battering, and 55% of violent child abuse.



It is not that intoxication produces pleasant experiences or destructive behaviors directly, rather it releases behavior that otherwise would have been inhibited. When the local environment elicits violence and remote proscriptions inhibit it, alcohol intoxication releases violence. When the local environment elicits

helpfulness, intoxication promotes uninhibited helping behavior.

In both cases the behavior of the intoxicated person is disproportionately influenced by the most salient feature of the immediate environment, not by what is in his or her best interests.



Consequences of Alcohol Induced Myopia:

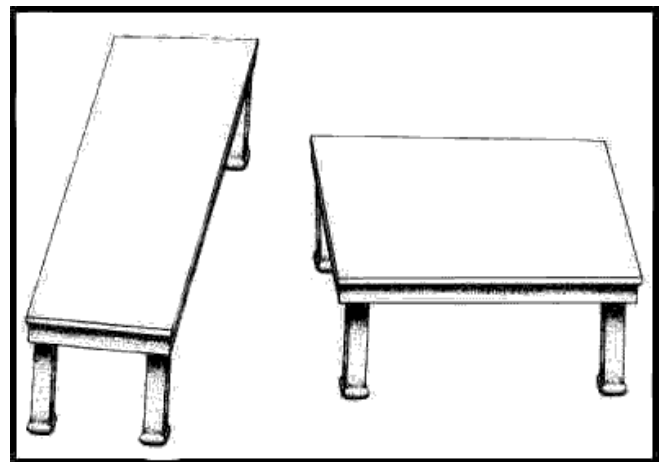
- **Self-inflation** - Favorable self-images of power, sexuality, etc., are not inhibited by abstract principals, or previous negative experiences.
- **Relief** - Lacking the resources to process remote information, the intoxicated person is typically free of worries and conflicts.
- **Self-loathing** - When the immediate circumstance arouses an unfavorable self-image, information that might balance extreme negative feelings, or inhibit irreversible self-destructive behaviors is not available. As a consequence, actions that have irreversible consequences may be released.

Myopia increases with dose. The more alcohol consumed, the greater is the myopia, and hence the greater the disinhibition.

Even when sober, it is Hasselbring's myopia that brings him down:

Mr. Hasselbring has vowed to control his drinking. The choices he makes along the path to loss of control are often innocent - he was simply too shortsighted to be influenced by the previous vow; at each choice point his actions are determined by what has captured his attention in the moment.

Despite his claim that he has learned his lesson this time [the first drink is a bad idea – even though it may not seem so at the time], Hasselbring is likely to be oblivious of it when he encounters a certain high risk situation.



[The table tops are identical]