

Talk It Up. Lock It Up!™ Column

What Does “Responsible Drinking” Really Mean?

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April is Alcohol Awareness Month. What does this mean for adults? When we think about safety around alcohol, we tend to think of the word “responsible”. Drink Responsibly. Drink in Moderation. If we watch any t.v., and especially if we’re sports fans, we have probably seen countless beer commercials that end with this advice. But what do these words mean when it comes to alcohol? For many folks, they may mean not drinking and driving, or not developing an addiction. For some, they may mean not drinking “too much”. However, without knowing specific guidelines (which most don’t), people are left to decide what these terms mean for themselves and it becomes easy to base these decisions on what we would *like them to be* rather than facts.

Fortunately, the Domino Strategy on How to Drink Responsibility is based on the Dietary Guidelines for Americans and provides research based guidelines for those who choose to drink. Those guidelines advocate a 0-1-2 approach. ZERO drinks for people who are under 21, operating any type of vehicle, pregnant, trying to become pregnant or breastfeeding, recovering alcoholics or chemically dependent, and using certain medications. No more than ONE standard drink per day for women and no more than TWO standard drinks per day for men. These may seem low to some but it’s important to remember that they are based on research and are designed to significantly reduce the risk (drinking is never without risk) for impairment, negative health consequences, injury and dependence. (It’s also important to understand our unique genetic risk, such as a family history of addiction or certain kinds of cancer, which may make any alcohol use high risk.)

Responsibility for adults also means acknowledging how our alcohol use and other practices may be impacting the youth in our family and in our community. If we choose to drink, that includes modeling a healthy relationship with alcohol, such as following the Domino Strategy, not using it as a stress reducer, and not making it the center of every occasion or celebration.

Reducing underage access to alcohol is another area where everyone has a part to play. Last week in Wake County, the adult brother of a young girl who died after a car crash was charged with buying her alcohol. Though they are awaiting lab results, there was an open bottle of liquor at the scene and reports that she had been drinking prior to the crash. Most youth who drink in Orange County get alcohol from a friend or sibling over the age of 21, from their own home, or from the home of a friend. If you have alcohol in your home, secure and monitor it. If your children have turned 21, your work is not over. Keep talking about alcohol, how to use it responsibly if they choose to drink (remember 0-1-2), and how to protect themselves and others by refusing to buy alcohol for those under 21.

Personal responsibility is a key factor in reducing the potential harms related to alcohol but it is also vital to recognize that underage and high risk drinking impact our entire community and everyone should have an investment in this issue. This past month, Alcohol Awareness Month, a fraternity and more than a dozen UNC students were added as defendants (in addition to the driver’s parents and local bar owners) in a civil lawsuit over the car crash, caused by 20 year old Chandler Kania, that killed three people in 2015. Regardless of the outcomes of these lawsuits, this tragedy perfectly illustrates how personal responsibility has become a community’s responsibility.

Do your part to prevent underage and high risk drinking.