

# Sedative or Energizer? The Complex Role of Alcohol Abuse in Brain Chemistry

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idely consumed and most people have accepted drinking as part of their socializing. However, most think alcohol is a stimulant that energizes people while the truth is that alcohol can act as both a sedative and energizer. It also has a profound effect on brain chemistry depending on the duration and amount consumed.

## The Dual Nature of Alcohol

Alcohol's effects on the brain are versatile and how it affects your body depends on your tolerance level, your age, sex and body composition as well as the amount you consume.

When you start drinking, the initial doses of alcohol trigger a surge in dopamine levels in the brain. This may increase your heart rate and leave you feeling stimulated. At the same time, it enhances the inhibitory actions of the neurotransmitter gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA). This leads to a dampening of brain activity, making you feel calm and relaxed and reducing your inhibitions. During this initial stage, you may experience stress relief and feel socially at ease.

However, if you keep drinking, the dual nature of alcohol becomes apparent. After the initial stimulating effect, alcohol starts to suppress dopamine. This in turn slows down your central nervous system, decreasing your heart rate and blood pressure while impairing your mental clarity. Your reaction time is reduced and you may feel disoriented or sleepy. The suppression of dopamine can make you feel sad, anxious, listless and restless. At this point, you may feel compelled to drink some more to dispel these distressing feelings.

The more you drink, the more you'll be caught up in a vicious cycle with alcohol alternating between being a sedative and an energizer. Since it's more of a depressant than a stimulant, it will often leave you feeling worse than before. Over time, the brain adapts to these fluctuations, putting you at risk of developing both tolerance and dependence.

## Changes in Brain Chemistry

Chronic alcohol abuse results in significant alterations in brain chemistry. These changes can result in long-term damage and complicate the recovery process:

- **Tolerance** – This occurs when the brain becomes accustomed to the presence of alcohol, requiring more of it to achieve the same effects.
- **Dependence** – Physical and psychological dependence often accompany tolerance. Individuals will often experience withdrawal symptoms including tremors, seizures and anxiety as the brain tries to regain equilibrium when alcohol is absent.
- **Structural changes** – Chronic alcohol abuse can lead to structural changes in the brain and even damage to brain cells. This can result in brain atrophy and encephalopathy or Wernicke-Korsakoff syndrome.

## Choose a Life Beyond Alcohol Addiction

Beating alcohol addiction may be challenging but it can be done with help from the [Grand Falls Center for Recovery](#). As the [premier addiction treatment center in Missouri](#), we focus on providing compassionate and comprehensive holistic care to address both the [physical and underlying issues contributing to addiction](#). Our approach is designed to help [those battling drug and alcohol addiction](#) to not only break free but also rebuild lives focused on long-term sobriety.

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