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## The Young and the Reckless

**Immature brains, personalities keep Cinco de Mayo drinking parties a place for the young.**

*Story by Erik Potter*

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**C**olumbia's downtown establishments will serve many rounds of cervezas and margaritas this weekend as students celebrate Mexico's 1862 victory over the French in a key battle to preserve its independence.

Americanized — controversially — as a drinking holiday, binge drinking on Cinco de Mayo features prominently on many college students' social calendars. Although not the norm, the abuse of alcohol through frequent bingeing during the college years is seen as socially acceptable; it's even glamorized in movies such as *Animal House* and *National Lampoon: Van Wilder*.

But the same drinking behaviors feted at 22 are frowned upon at 32, says Kenneth Sher, MU Curators Distinguished Professor of Psychology. It's part of the "maturing out" process that happens by the early 30s, when many of those single students have taken on adult roles, such as spouses, employees and parents.

But research Sher has done, along with graduate students Alvaro Verges and Andrew Littlefield, shows that it's not just increased responsibilities that crowd out drinking but something more physiological.

"These changes in drinking are accompanied by changing personalities in the direction of greater psycho-social maturity," Sher says. In plain English, people become less impulsive.

Part of the reason for the change, he says, is a maturing brain. The prefrontal cortex, sitting just behind the forehead, governs impulse control. It doesn't fully mature until about age 25, so some of the reduced binge drinking seen post-college comes simply from better self control.

Sher says they have also found that personalities change throughout adulthood as emotional maturity continues to develop. In fact, the abundance of people maturing out of alcohol abuse in their late 20s and early 30s is due mostly to the relatively large number of people who abuse alcohol in their early 20s: The

rate at which people abandon those behaviors around 30 years old is little different than at any other time of life.

There are a number of complicating factors, however. Drinking behaviors vary by profession (bartenders drink more than school teachers) and can be influenced, positively or negatively, by life events. And the maturing-out phenomenon is not universal, Sher says, and is not seen in the same form in the developing world.

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