Bonding with teammates without alcohol? [1]

Hello Alice,

I am a freshman on a collegiate varsity sports team. Team gatherings, when we are not practicing, usually consist of excessive drinking with and without drinking games. I did not drink in high school and when I tried drinking with the team it made me feel really sick. I want to bond with my teammates (they are really great when not drunk) but I don't know how because if I am the only guy in the room not drinking I can't play drinking games with them, discuss favorite types of alcohol, or even carry on a real conversation because at a certain point in the night they stop forming coherent sentences. I need to be friends with this group of people but I would like to do so in a way that allows me to remember the night in the morning. Is this possible? What should I do?

While I don't really approve of their lifestyle (why devote six days a week to practice only to reduce your performance with alcohol?), I make no moral judgement. I don't want to change their way of doing things, I just want them to respect my way.

Thank you,

Unintentional Party Pooper

Answer

Dear Unintentional Party Pooper,

While you may think you're the odd one out on your team because of your feelings toward alcohol, there's no doubt that your question has many empathizers! Learning how to communicate your feelings and needs honestly may actually make your situation easier. Sure, it can be hard to stick to your feelings about what is right for you and for your body in the midst of a culture of drinking, Unintentional Party Pooper. But, you'll be happy to know that there are a number of potential ways to navigate those relationships (more on that in a bit). And though you may feel that you're being a wet blanket, it's entirely possible that being open and honest about your feelings and choices with your teammates will earn you the respect you desire.

That being said, it's no wonder that you feel the way that you do; sports and alcohol have a deeply embedded cultural history, including players and spectators (think of all the beer consumed in pubs while watching soccer or during baseball or football games). In fact, alcohol is the most heavily used drug in both collegiate and professional sports. There are, of course,
people who prefer not to drink or choose to drink infrequently and many non-drinkers learn how to be in social situations like parties, holidays, family functions, and sporting events, with alcohol. So, how do they do it? Here are some tips for you to consider as you navigate your situation:

- **Be honest.** When the conversation turns to booze among your teammates, rather than attempting to find common ground, you can express your real feelings by saying, "Dude, you know, I'm not into drinking, it makes me feel sick." You also don't mention anyone else sharing the same feelings you do about alcohol use on your team; however, if you're willing to be honest, it's possible you may find that some of your teammates feel the same way you do.

- **Talking with one person at time can be easier than a group.** Consider pulling a teammate you are close with or the team captain aside when there's no alcohol around and say, "Hey, can I talk to you? I'm having a hard time relating to team when drinking is usually what we do when we hang out. Is there anything we can do to make things less focused on drinking?"

- **Consider talking to your coach or trainer.** You don't have to name names, but you could ask whether the team could have someone from your school's health services department to present on alcohol, health, and athletic performance. This may be a way for your team to learn more about how alcohol use can negatively impact athletic performance.

- **Consider joining activities that allow you to meet students who may drink less.** While spending time with your teammates may be a way to bond, there's no rule that says you have to spend all of your time with them. Some campus clubs and extracurriculars may be filled with students who are less preoccupied with getting a buzz on. Do you have an interest outside of your sport? What about social dance? Theater? Intramural sports? A professional club? Faith-based organizations? Community service? Social justice groups? Have an interest that isn't covered by your university's student group offerings? Consider starting your own club or group! Either way, you may surprise yourself by meeting other students who are interested in other activities that don't involve drinking.

- **Plan your own social events.** Think of activities that you can suggest that don't involve drinking AND serve as a way to hang with the team. Make a suggestion that the team could organize a practice session for underprivileged kids in the neighborhood. Perhaps you could host a team study session before finals. You might even encourage your teammates in joining you to support your school's other sports teams.

- **On nights when the team is drinking, have a beverage plan in place.** If you do choose to drink, you don't have to keep up with any of your teammates. Try to sip your booze slowly, or alternate each alcoholic drink with a non-alcoholic beverage like water, juice, or soda. You may also decide not to consume any alcohol at all. For tips on how to drink moderately or clever ways to say no in social situations, take a look at How do I drink in moderation?[^2].

- **When nights out with the team stop being fun, cut it short.** You may still find that team bonding takes place alongside alcohol use. But, if you go to hang out with the team, it's totally OK to call it a night if you're not having fun anymore. Don't be afraid to be your own truth, as they say in the New Age groups.

It sounds like you know yourself and your needs, Unintentional Party Pooper. By being yourself and standing by your choices about alcohol use, you may gain the respect you desire from your teammates. It's even possible that doing so could help shift the team culture to be
less alcohol-centric. However, if your decision to not drink doesn’t go over well, you may want to think about how much time and effort to invest in a set of friendships that may feel limiting or narrow—even if they are your teammates.

Alice!
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