

## LESSON 11 – PARTIES & SOCIAL GATHERINGS

*Some people, especially if you have been the victim of violence, may find some of the subject matter contained in this article disturbing or traumatizing. If you are still in the process of recovering from violence and abuse, you may want to consult with a mental health professional before reading this content. The subject matter is also intended for an adult audience, and so if you are under 18, you should have an adult read the material first (parental guidance is advised for people under 18). This article addresses the subject matter head-on, so reader discretion is advised.*

### How to Stay Safe When Partying

Before looking at parties and social gatherings in detail, it is useful to understand how people behave in groups, and how groups themselves work and operate. Firstly, it is important to accept that human beings are social creatures, and have strong, innate desires, which make us want to form groups; if a large party is being held on campus, most people will almost instinctually want to attend and be part of that group; those that don't attend, and don't share a desire to, probably belong to another group (possibly a small circle of friends) whose interests and values lie outside of those organizing and attending the party/social gathering. This is not to argue that one group is right, and the other is wrong, just to explain why parties are so popular, and why people naturally want to attend them.

Groups have rules and breed conformity – the same is true of parties and social gatherings. If you are not a heavy drinker, and you are thinking about attending a party where heavy drinking will be the norm, understand that if you don't partake in this activity, you are breaking a rule – you are not conforming to the actions and behaviors of the group. You can argue that it is your right to choose the level of alcohol consumption that you are comfortable with, and you would be right, however you would not be right in the eyes of the group, who will want you to conform to their rules and ideals; you cannot be part of the group, without adhering to heavy drinking, and this puts you on the outside of the group, which threatens and challenges it – if you're not part of the group, you're an enemy of it. It may be that members of the group, aggressively pursue you, and hound you, to start consuming alcoholic beverages; and it may be that you will be confused as to why the group won't leave you alone on this i.e. you're not bothering them, so why are they bothering you? To be part of the group, to be at the party, you have to adhere to the rules of the group and party. The rules and norms are what hold the group/party together and if individuals start to dissent from them, there is

the chance that the group as a social entity, will collapse e.g. what if everyone decides they don't want to drink heavily, where's the group/party then? Individual thinking is a challenge to group thinking.

People will naturally default to the ideas and will of the group, even when they know the group is wrong – and even when not speaking out against the group puts them at risk. As social creatures, social embarrassment is something we try and avoid at all costs, and we can end up going along with the majority, even when we know it is not in our best interest – it is very easy to find yourself buying into groupthink. Solomon Asch in the 1950's conducted a series of experiments, where an individual was put in a situation where there was a group of participants, who were plants. The individual was then shown things such as picture cards with lines drawn on them, and asked which ones were longer or shorter than a line drawn on another card. The group (all of whom were in on the experiment), would then disagree with the correct and obvious choice, and the individual would be given a chance to revise their answer, and it would be seen whether the individual chose to disagree, or to conform. Individuals overwhelmingly chose to go with the group rather than risk social embarrassment. Be aware that when you attend a party, where members engage in risky activities, you may find it hard not to go along with them, and/or your friends may find themselves unable to intervene on your behalf, due to their own risk of social embarrassment.

The “Bystander Effect” and the diffusion of responsibility, is a well understood phenomena – and demonstrates why it is not good to completely rely on others for your personal safety. Bibb Latane and John Darley in 1969, conducted an experiment, where participants were put in a waiting room that started to fill with smoke; when participants were alone 75% left and reported the smoke. This dropped to 10% when others (confederates or plants) were present in the room, with them. Even when people see something that is wrong, such as somebody being hassled to drink more, or being harassed sexually, few people will speak out. If that person is you, you should be prepared to deal with the situation rather than rely on others to come to your assistance, as each individual may think and expect the others in the group to act and take responsibility.

Most groups have some sort of initiation rite that allows somebody to join the group. Initiation rites, can be really simple and straightforward. It could be that when you first enter the party, you are told to grab a cup, and drink from the punch bowl, etc. This is a simple test/initiation rite, to see whether you will conform to the rules and expectations of the group; it's something that everybody has to do to “get into” the party. Initiation rites don't have to be humiliating and degrading, however the more extreme they are, the closer the group will feel, having all gone through a shared or similar experience – this is why fraternities and sororities use them.

A study done by Eliot Aronson and Judson Mills in 1959, had groups of women, receive either a “Severe Initiation”, a “Mild” Initiation, or no initiation (the control group), before joining a group (whose activities were actually extremely boring – though this wasn’t known at the time, by the participants of the study). Those receiving the initiations had to speak into a microphone, which they believed was being broadcasted to the members of the group they were trying to join. Those receiving the “Severe” initiation had to read two passages out loud from sexually explicit novels, describing sexual acts, and repeat 12 obscene words (this might seem quite tame by today’s standards, but in 1959 it would be deemed as a fairly humiliating and degrading process). Those going through the “Mild” initiation, had to repeat words, that had sexual connotations, such as virgin, prostitute, etc. but weren’t sexually explicit. Afterwards, each “new” member of the group had to listen to a discussion by the existing group concerning what they had just read, that was played to them over an intercom (it was in fact a recording, so that all participants, heard the same discussion). The recording had members of the group speaking in halting sentences, with no emotion, and often mumbling, etc. Basically it was an extremely tedious and boring discussion, with no merit and worth. At the end of the “discussion” participants were asked to rate the discussion on intelligence and worth, according to 9 questions. The results, quite conclusively, showed that those who had undergone the severe initiation, were much more heavily invested in the idea of the group than those who had received a mild initiation, who in turn were more heavily invested than those who had received no initiation.

Not all initiation rites have to be complex, involved, and well planned e.g. you may be asked to down a shot on entering. But most groups use them in some form or another. You rarely get to join a group for “free”, even if the initiation rite is well disguised, and seems inconsequential.

When we look at the way that groups operate, and this includes parties and social gatherings, we should understand a few things. This isn’t to say that we shouldn’t attend such events, but rather we should understand what we are potentially dealing with, and how we can mitigate and deal with the potential risks we may have to face.

Firstly, you can’t change the group and/or the rules of the group e.g. if it’s a party where everybody is expected to get very drunk, then you’ll be expected to get drunk too, and standing up to the group on such an issue will not be effective (and don’t rely on anyone to come to your assistance, and back you up) – you may also find it socially embarrassing to do so. This means you shouldn’t attend parties where you know you could be put in a position to do something you wouldn’t want to. You can’t win that fight – you may even be forced to comply, either explicitly by somebody forcing you to drink, or implicitly by someone spiking your drinks, etc. Unfortunately in these cases, the group always wins.

Secondly, do your research. If it is a fraternity or sorority run party, check out their page or member's pages on social media sites such as Facebook and Pinterest, etc. If the photos on them, are of drunk, half naked individuals, looking like they're acting out of control, the chances are that's a good forecast of what their next upcoming party/social gathering is going to look like. If it's not your scene, and you're not comfortable with being involved with that group, don't go. Another consideration you should make, is that you might end up being in one of those photos, which may then be put up on some social media site, with your name possibly tagged – if you have a problem with that, you should give some thoughts as to whether you should attend or not (prospective employers do use social media when vetting applicants for positions in their company – and a photo of you partying “hard”, might not give them the best impression of you).

At the end of the day, you should attend social gatherings and parties, where you are comfortable with both the drinking levels, and the sexual expectations of those attending e.g. does attending such a party, mean that you will be expected to sleep with someone. Whilst such expectations shouldn't exist, you should be realistic about it – just because a culture shouldn't pervade, it doesn't mean it doesn't exist. If you've heard rumors of women being pressured sexually at certain parties, or even forced to have sex, that's not a situation that you want to put yourself in.

## **Alcohol Consumption**

If you go out to a bar, club or campus party, have a plan on what to do at the event, other than drinking e.g. plan to dance, socialize, etc. It is always good to put this thought in your head before you go out, so that drinking and getting drunk doesn't end up becoming the point of the evening. It is also a good idea to have an idea ahead of time, concerning the number of drinks you are going to have; this will give you an idea about how to pace your drinking, so that you don't end up over-consuming.

Understand that just because you were able to “handle” a certain number of drinks, on a previous occasion, that doesn't necessarily mean you can handle the same number of drinks on another. Tiredness, your emotional state, and the amount you have eaten, etc. will all affect your ability to metabolize, and deal with the effects of alcohol. Eating a full meal before you drink is always advisable, as it's not wise to drink on an empty stomach. You shouldn't drink if you are: Hungry, Angry, Lonely or Tired (HALT). Another thing to be aware of is that when you drink mixed drinks, such as Rum and Coke, Vodka and Tonic, etc. the measures of alcohol may not always be the same, in fact if a drink tastes overly strong, you might need to adjust the number of drinks you were planning to have. Drinking bottled drinks, is an easier way to quantify and measure the amount of alcohol you have consumed/are consuming.

You should never simply accept an open drink from somebody – however trustworthy they may seem, or even if you know them. They may be handing you a drink, in good faith, not knowing if it has been tampered with. Avoid punch bowls, and drinking from opened bottles of wine etc. - all of these could have had something added to them. If for any reason you have to leave a drink unattended, get yourself a fresh one. If somebody, such as a date or friend, offers to buy you a drink from a bar, go with them (you can always make the excuse that you haven't yet decided what you want), so that you can see the bartender either mix it, or hand it over – it is easy enough for them to have it mixed double or triple strength or to slip something into it on their way back.

## **Going Out/Partying In Groups**

There is a truth that there is safety in numbers, and a predatory individual who knows you have others looking out for you, and watching your back, is less likely to select you as a victim. If you find yourself on your own, in a bar, club or similar, where your friends are also present, and a stranger or someone you don't know very well, introduces themselves to you, ask them to come and meet your friends (you don't have to do it immediately, but somewhere in your conversation/interaction you should do this); this will let them know you are not alone, and give your friends the chance to meet a person who has expressed an interest in you. Involving your friends, means that there are witnesses to the interaction, and that you are part of a cohesive group, who came together and are probably planning to leave together – if somebody is trying to get you on your own for any dangerous or malicious reasons, your friends represent another obstacle for them to overcome. Understand also that your friends may be a personal safety risk to you, that they may collectively decide to do something, such as go across town to another party (instead of staying at the one you were at, or instead of continuing to drink in a bar or club as planned), which you don't want to do, due to either personal preference or safety concerns. It may be that if you are with a friend, who wants to do something similar, but doing so would mean that she would be on her own, you may feel obliged to go with her. If you have friends who constantly behave in this way, you may want to make it clear to them that in the future, you will take responsibility for yourself (such as arranging your own arrival and departure from such events), and expect them to do the same. This may seem a harsh approach to take, however the alternative is to be constantly put in danger by irresponsible friends.

You may also have friends who expect you to take responsibility for them. You may have a friend who quickly gets drunk, and plays the helpless card, so that you are forced to either leave them or play the caregiver card, looking after them and being responsible for all the logistics, such as how to get them home, etc. This is not by accident. Whilst you take charge of them, they have the freedom to act and behave as they want, and anytime you try and prevent them doing something

dangerous you look like the wet blanket, whilst they look like the carefree partygoer. If this happens on a continual basis, you may want as part of your boundary setting, to explain that this is not a role you will continue to provide and that if this individual keeps acting in this way, you will cease to go with them to the types of events where they engage in this behavior – either by not going at all, or going on your own.

It matters little what personal safety plans you put in place for yourself, if your loyalty and sense of friendship to someone else means that you have to compromise them. It is sometimes worth acknowledging that you may like and enjoy somebody's company in one setting or situation, and in another find them completely obnoxious and frustrating. Although you don't have to explain it to them in such certain terms, you should let such individuals know that you don't expect to be put in dangerous or compromising situations, because of them.

### **Looking Out For Each Other**

You should let the people you go to a party with, know that you have concerns for both yours and their safety. It is probably best not to do this just as you're leaving to go to a party, as it can bring the mood down and cause people to resent and discount what you are saying. Looking out for each other can be as simple as somebody holding on to your drink for you when you go to the bathroom, etc. so you don't have to either leave it unattended, waste it by throwing it away, or finish it quickly (something that may cause you to speed up your drinking).

It's also sometimes easier to see what is going on when you are observing it happening to someone else, than when it's happening to you. If somebody is interested in you, for whatever reason, they may go to a lot of effort to make sure that you don't recognize their interest, however they might not be so careful in hiding this from others who may be watching. If you notice people who have an interest in a friend of yours, or are talking about them to somebody else, it may be worth keeping an eye on them, as the night/party progresses. If you see them later on make their way over to your friend, take the time to observe the interaction, and see if it is necessary for you to intervene. You don't have to intervene in an aggressive or challenging way, but you could "join" the conversation they are having, and judge from the way you are received, if this individual has some plan that they are trying to implement e.g. they are aggressive towards you, keep trying to bar you from the conversation, and keep your friend separated.

Sometimes the person you are trying to protect and keep safe, isn't interested either in your advice or what you have to say. Predatory individuals are masters at getting their victims to want what they want. It may be that your friend is flattered by the interest of a good looking guy at the party, one

who you had heard talking about spiking people's drinks, or making derogatory sexual comments about the way some of the girls at the party were dressed e.g. were dressed in a way, where they could only expect to get treated one way, etc. Despite telling your friend this, they may still want to go off with this individual, and will have little or no time for your advice or concerns. At the end of the day, you can only do so much for people, and if they fail to take on board the importance of what you are saying, repeating yourself over and over again is only likely to strengthen their resolve to do whatever it is they want. At some point, you have to accept that the decision is theirs to make. It may be worth trying to get some support from other friends to help address your concerns, however depending what is going on with them at that moment, they may not want to get involved. The more of a culture of looking out for each other that you can create, the more likely it is that your friends will think about their own personal safety, look out for you, and understand and be receptive to your concerns for them.

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