

Transcript: Alcohol is STILL a Drug: An Exploratory Webinar Series (April 5, 2022)

Presenter: Yengyee Lor
Recorded on April 5, 2022

REBECCA BULLER: All right, guys. I got to take a moment here. Well, good morning, and welcome. We are so glad that you could join us. We're going to get started right away. And I want to extend our greeting to Alcohol is Still a Drug. And we're going to be hearing from Yengyee Lor. And the presentation is brought to you by SAMHSA and ATTC Great Lakes Networks. And the opinions expressed-- whoa. Sorry. Something moved.

PRESENTER 1: Keep going, Rebecca. You're good.

REBECCA BULLER: OK. The opinions expressed are not those of the Department of Health and Human Services and SAMHSA, but those of the speakers. And we are excited-- wow, it's really just moving on its own. I'm sorry about that. I have no control. Somehow, I lost total control of this.

PRESENTER 1: Rebecca, Jen is covering you, so you can just keep going.

REBECCA BULLER: Thank you. So this presentation was prepared for the Great Lakes MHTTC under the cooperative agreement from Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. We did that. There's the disclaimer. Again, language matters. That's the important thing. We want to make sure that we use affirming language. People-first, person-centered language, they do have power, and they matter to us.

A few housekeeping things-- if you have technical issues, you can message me, individually, Rebecca Buller, or Alyssa Chwala in the chat section at the bottom of your screen, and we'll be happy to assist you. If you have questions for the speaker, please put them in the either Q&A section at the bottom of your screen. And again, we will, if we have time, answer them, and if not, we will circle back and try to get answers and get those dispersed out to those who are attending.

There actually won't be a link to a survey this time, and that's OK. Because it's a short presentation, we won't be doing that survey. But we will be doing certificates of attendance, and they'll be sent out to those who attend. If you want to know more about the events and trainings that are offered, please visit our social media sites, our web pages, and you can learn more about future opportunities.

So now I want to introduce you to Yengyee Lor. She's a trainer, leadership coach, and organizational consultant helping organizations strategically

deliver meaningful organizational impact that is holistic, sustainable, and profitable. She's a certified PCC coach, certified nonprofit consultant, workforce planning strategist, and keynote speaker. Yengyee has degrees in industrial and organizational psychology, counseling, and social work. Thank you so much for being here, and I'll turn things over to you.

YENGYEE LOR: Awesome. Hi, everyone. Wow. I've never been on one where it's this big and wide, so very excited to be with all of you 210 participants out there. So very excited. Feel free, as I'm going through, because it's such a short presentation, to ask questions. I want to make it meaningful and answer questions that you will have. And I'm not going to be able to-- I don't see you, and so the team will monitor that. But I'll just get started. And if there's any questions, I'll just trust Jennifer and the ATTC team to let me know what those are.

Rebecca already talked a little bit about me. I am very passionate about the Hmong community. I am Hmong, of course. And just really excited to be invited today to speak to all of you about a topic that is very important and becoming somewhat of a challenge in our community. So let's see here. Try to navigate technology a little bit here.

Alcohol, in our culture, is really embedded in every part of our ceremony, traditions, whether it's weddings, social occasions, religious, spiritual practices. Alcohol is viewed as-- possibly, even the American culture. I see a lot of alignment in terms of just even the perspective in American culture. It's kind of a part of who we are as a culture. It's really embedded in terms of just our practices.

So maybe that might be a little bit different from the American culture and the Hmong culture is that the Hmong culture, it is very embedded into our practices. So when we're having a wedding, which is mostly where alcohol is very prevalent, alcohol serves a purpose and intention. And so I want to say that because the perception still-- and the second bullet you'll see, the perception of alcoholism and alcoholics are shunned in our community.

So if you become addicted or alcoholism is a part of you, you're a functioning adult in the community, you're shunned as well. So you're looked down upon, but alcohol is acceptable. So alcohol is acceptable in a way, especially if it's being used intentionally.

I would say sometimes our culture is very contradictory in the way it presents the message around alcohol. Alcohol is also part of coming of age and especially prevalent and relevant to young men that grow up in the community. It's like, oh, you're expected to hold your alcohol, or be able to hold your alcohol, be able to drink alcohol. That's kind of a rite of passage almost for young men.

And so you can see some of the messaging around alcohol, and the acceptance of alcohol, and the practices of alcohol that could encourage,

somewhat, the abuse of alcohol. But at the same time, our culture does not look upon alcoholism or alcoholics where they come to a point of not being able to function in the community as productive members to then put them down and shun them.

And then there's that other side where individuals who may be addicted to alcohol don't get the support that they need. There's not a lot of support, knowledge around just how to help individuals that do get to a point where they become addicted to alcohol.

So again, because it is very embedded in our culture, very intentionally used in our culture, the approach in our culture to addressing alcohol is going to be very different than any other culture because it is so embedded and it is so intentional in how we do our ceremonies.

Now, you can see an example. I want to show a quick example of just-- this is a video on the table manners. This is part of our practices. Whether it's at any kind of special occasion-- a party to celebrate the birth of a child, or a wedding, or any one of our social gatherings-- how important it is in that we also have a very-- this is the cultural aspect-- very embedded table manners of how to handle drinks. And drinks is such a huge part.

So I'm going to share this video quickly. Let me know if you guys can hear the sound.

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

- Hi, everybody. Welcome to Hmong Culture 101. On this first--

[END PLAYBACK]

YENGYEE LOR: I'm going to skip to the important part here. Can everyone hear?

AUDIENCE: Yep, we can.

[VIDEO PLAYBACK]

- --if you end up sitting at a table. Before we begin, there are five basic principles to drinking at a traditional Hmong table. The first one is seat position, second, the flow of drinks, third, cup arrangement. fourth, how to drink, and five, how to refill. Each one will be explained in depth as we cover them.

Let's begin. As I mentioned in the outline, where you sit at a table will determine how you drink or refill. Here are the basic parts and positions of a traditional Hmong drinking table.

At the head of the table, we have the two seats responsible for initiating the traditional drinks. These positions are known as [INAUDIBLE] chiv cawv or [INAUDIBLE] chiv cawv, literally translated into "drink initiators" and "regulators." These two are very powerful positions at the table. They may choose to add additional rules, regulate drinking manners, give out penalties, AKA [SPEAKING HMONG] and so on and so forth.

And at the end of the table, we have the two seats that are responsible for receiving or ending the drinks. And these positions are known as [INAUDIBLE] tsawb cawv or [INAUDIBLE] tsawb cawv, literally translated into "drink receivers." These two are also responsible to help the drink initiators watch everyone to make sure the flow is going smoothly.

Along one horizontal side, that's where all the older folks, or people who have a specific role in the occasion, or special guests will end up sitting. Along the other horizontal side will usually be the guests or other youth. And if you're a young guy, chances are you'll be sitting in positions one, two, 11, 12, or 13 through 20.

Now that we have the seat position out of the way, let's start with the easy positions. To make things easier for us, let's pretend you are sitting in seat number 14. Now that we got seat positions out of the way, let's talk about the flow of drinks. The flow of drinks is like a river. It starts from one end and flows down to the other.

Now, most rivers don't fall backwards, therefore, you shall not drink backwards. That's right. Thou shall not drink backwards. The flow will vary depending on your seat position. And it will also vary depending on where you are sitting. In this case, because you're in seat number 14 and the head of the table is to your left, the drinks will flow to your right.

As most of you may already know, traditional drinks at a table come in sets of two shot glasses on top of a single plate. The content of the glasses varies depending on the family, the event, and who you are. It can be beer, liquor, water, or soda, or whatever else you want to drink. At a typical event, there are usually four sets of drinks that traditionally come through. And these are known as the [SPEAKING HMONG] or step-by-step kind of drinks. The cups will be filled all the way to the rim with the beverage of choice every time you refill them.

So before moving on, let's review of what we have so far. So far, we've established that you are seated in seat number 14 and that the flow of drinks is flowing from your left to your right. And now you understand the cup arrangements. Now that we got the review out of the way, let's talk about how to drink. First things first, before you drink, you got to alert the person to your right and make sure that they acknowledge you before you drink.

Why is it important to make sure they acknowledge you before you drink?

Well, it's important because some guys will play with you and pretend they don't hear you. Or they're so engaged in another conversation that they didn't hear you alerting them that the drink is coming. This is the part where you say, [SPEAKING HMONG] or [SPEAKING HMONG], or if the name of the drink, you can say, [SPEAKING HMONG].

Now, they'll usually acknowledge you with a hand gesture, or a [SPEAKING HMONG] or both. And if you fail to alert them or fail to wait until they acknowledge you before you drink, chances are, they'll tell you to drink again because you forgot to let them know that drink was coming.

[END PLAYBACK]

YENGYEE LOR: So I basically just wanted to show you guys, very briefly, how our tables are set up and how drinking is really embedded into our practices. This is a very standard table manner, a Hmong table manner for the Hmong culture. And we do this at every event. And as you can see, the young man in the video is saying there's a process to this. And if you don't follow the process, you can get in trouble, meaning you have to drink again.

So this is where sometimes the overdrinking at parties happens is because it starts to be a little-- I don't know. The only word that comes to my mind is vindictive, but maybe it's not vindictive, but someone wants to play with the other person.

For example, what the young man is saying is, if you don't do these table manners correctly, and the guy doesn't acknowledge you and doesn't accept your drink, you can have to redrink. And then it starts this vicious flow of then, OK, now you're going to start to overdrink.

And we all know that, when you have a few drinks, it just kind of tumbles on. And this can make for very toxic-- [LAUGHS] intoxicating situations. It was a joke. But that's how you can get into overdrinking at parties and events. Sometimes there's fights that start and addictions that happen as a result of some of these things. So I wanted to just show you guys that video of how embedded it is into our culture and that how it can also stimulate alcohol abuse.

So there's many, many ways. One, of course, it's in our practices I've mentioned and our tradition to use alcohol intentionally. So the purpose and reason behind the use of alcohol is really-- there's some good intentions behind it. To them, it's healing. It's respectful. Alcohol use of as a form of here, I respect you, so I'm giving you this wine or this alcohol. So it's used very intentionally. Where it becomes a problem, the alcohol abuse, is when it's done to the extreme. Well, any culture when anything is too extreme, that becomes a problem.

There are other ways that alcohol then becomes a problem. So one, it's embedded into our culture. And there's a lot of peer pressure around that. For

example, welcoming of the new year, everyone takes a shot when they enter a party, or event, or a new year.

Again, it's a form of respect. And so you almost feel very pressure to take that drink. And if you don't take that drink, it's a disrespect in our culture to not take that drink. So embedded in that is the tradition, but then what comes along is that pressure, that feeling of, oh, if I don't take this drink, that person is going to feel disrespected. And if I disrespect someone in our culture, that's a huge problem.

And so there's a lot of peer pressure around drinking because it's so associated with respect in our culture. So that can lead to alcohol abuse. The other is trauma. A lot of people in our culture use alcohol to drown the trauma to get over some things, to deal with the PTSD from the war. So understanding trauma in our culture will also help you understand where some of the abuse will come from.

Along with the traumas, the mental health, depression, this is somewhat of a newer phenomenon. It's probably been around. We just didn't recognize that until we came to America and are seeing some of the mental health and understanding, gaining knowledge, around mental health.

That part of mental health-- because in our culture, it's very hush-hush. You don't share your concerns. You don't share your problems with anybody outside because it looks bad up upon you to be able to be vulnerable and share that because it's like, why would you share that? That's something that doesn't look good. It's all about giving face in our culture.

And so some of that, the mental health and the trauma, the keeping things inside bottled up, these can result to abuse of alcohol as well. Not having a healthy outlet to navigate some of the life events that people are going through can result to the abuse of alcohol and why it becomes such a medicating thing for individuals in my community.

So I really want to conclude with this. A very high level is although we have very contradictory perspectives on alcohol, it's gone to a point where because it's so embedded in our practices, people have abused it and don't know the limits of their tolerance with alcohol.

And so as I look at what are the needs and as I look at the very limited research-- so on the bottom here, you see a bullet about "collect better data to make more informed decisions." There is no data whatsoever. There's a couple of focus groups and listening sessions that were done to better understand alcohol in the Hmong community, but there's nothing else.

There's no other data to show what is really the issue, how are people abusing and why, and all those data that could really help us make better decisions for the Hmong people. So we don't have any of that data collected to really determine, to what degree is alcohol impacting our community? We

don't have that information. So one of the needs in our community is to collect better data around some of these things.

The other is make services accessible to the Hmong community. So I think for the broader community, how are you reaching into the Hmong community to provide the accessible services of alcohol counseling, AODA counseling, things like that? How is that two-way, like from the outside going in as well as how do people from my community reach out and get help in that aspect? Because they're not getting it internally in the culture. And they might actually be, like I said, shunned, or ridiculed, or picked on because they have a problem with alcohol or something. So there's a lot of fear around just disclosing that component of not being able to be a man.

So alcohol, in itself, impacts our young men tremendously, but it's impacting also our young women too. And so again, better data and collecting on what that looks like.

Have more culturally competent providers, meaning providers that will understand that degree and depth of where a young man coming in may feel so much embarrassment, so much fear around even disclosing some of his problems and trying to seek that and understanding that he or she may not get the support from the community to quit. And so there's a lot of those barriers that I think-- training around, how do you support Hmong individuals in our community to overcome alcoholism?

Have more culturally appropriate services. Traditional therapy may not be the right method in working with the Hmong community. Community outreach and education on alcoholism and the effects of alcohol-- again, education is key, I feel, across the board, more and more education and what alcohol does to a body.

And I think of the prime example of the smoking ads. Those are so impactful. I remember growing up, and then, all of a sudden, I see some of these really impactful ads about what smoking does to a person's lungs. Ooh, that hit.

So how do we do more of those kind of education to put the spotlight on alcoholism in any communities and, in particular, the Hmong community? Lots of education around, how do we do that?

I do want to say quickly that it's ironic I'm doing this presentation today because yesterday, I saw that the 18 Clan Council put out a statement around alcoholism. And I didn't get a chance to read the document that was given out to the community.

So the 18 Clan Council is our government system in the Hmong community. So it's very recognized by our elders. That's how we still practice. There's hierarchical order. And the 18 Clan Council is a representation from all 18 clans, so the Lor clan, the Vang clan, the [? Xiong ?] clan.

They're a council that represents the different clans. And they put out a statement on just alcoholism and how do you be careful. So I think that's a good start to even my presentation and sharing that. I was excited to see them put out a statement on that. Whether or not it will be complied with is yet to be seen. Like I said, I just saw that document come out yesterday.

Have more materials, videos, brochures in the Hmong language to really educate the young and the older generations around alcohol. Encourage and support the education and licensing of Hmong professionals in these fields. Again, more Hmong-- because we're still very cultural, and it's so bedded in our culture still, in America, that it's very important that we have Hmong professionals that can help other Hmong youths, adults navigate the system and not have that language barrier that sometimes gets in the way of providing services to the Hmong elders in our community or even the older adults in our community.

So here is, very high-level, some of the needs that I see, currently, that we need to get behind and really do things a little bit differently so we can help with alcoholism in our community. It's really a big issue. If I didn't highlight that before, it is really a big issue that even the 18 Clan Council is putting out a statement to say, hey, when we practice some of our practices, let's not encourage the amount of alcohol. And I think about this as a prime example how big this is such an issue is.

At a child's birthday party, I saw family bring cases of beer in. So beer is the poison of choice, I would say, in America. But in the old country where we're from, Laos, et cetera, it is liquor. So that's usually most in the culture, the older culture. So I want to end here because I'm out of time, but is there any questions?

And I have my contact information, if you'd like to learn more. Again, there's not a lot of research and information on this area. The little bit of research and information that we do have, it's not enough to make a lot of informed decisions and see how we can better help the Hmong community.

REBECCA BULLER: Yengyee, somebody asked, are women allowed to drink?

YENGYEE LOR: So they're not at the table. They are allowed to drink, and in fact encouraged now. They used to not. So women would not drink in the past.

So I would go, and as a young child, even as a young adult, women would not drink at all, actually, would not participate. And now within the last 10, 15 years, I want to say that women are actually encouraged. And I have people come up to me and give me alcohol. That's not been the case. The last 20-plus years, that's not been the case. But it is highly encouraged now and acceptable now to have women also partake in the drinking.

REBECCA BULLER: [INAUDIBLE] we have time for one more question. Somebody asked, where is the Hmong community primarily located?

YENGYEE LOR: So the Hmong communities are primarily located in California, Minnesota, Wisconsin, North Carolina, let's see, Colorado. They're a little bit everywhere-- Texas, some of these smaller communities. But the largest population is Wisconsin, Minnesota, and California. Fresno area is where the city in California is, and then Twin Cities, and then, in Wisconsin, where I'm from, Milwaukee, Central Wisconsin, Wausau area, Lacrosse, so all over.

REBECCA BULLER: Thank you so much, Yengyee. We learned a lot. And I appreciate all the information. Thank you for your time. If anybody is available, the next Alcohol is Still a Drug webinar series takes place on May 3. So you can use the same link, the same registration link that you received to hop on that one. And that one will be with the speaker Gabriela Zapata-Alma. And thank you, everybody, for your time, and hope to see you next month.