

# Alcohol and your emotions

**If you think that alcohol can help when you're feeling low, then you're not alone. Research says that almost a third (30%) of people in the UK drink to 'forget their problems'.<sup>(1)</sup>**

**Because alcohol in small amounts can make us feel good for a little while, it's tempting to drink when feeling sad or stressed out. But alcohol is only a short-term solution. Problems will still be there in the morning – and they'll look much worse with a hangover. Talking over your worries with friends, family or a teacher is a much smarter, and healthier, solution.**

## FACTS and FIGURES

Alcohol is a depressant that slows down brain activity. In small doses, alcohol may make you feel relaxed, confident and happy. But as you drink more, these feelings can change into anger, anxiety and even depression.<sup>(2)</sup>

With all these side effects of alcohol going on in your head, it can be difficult to put problems into perspective. Because alcohol affects your judgement<sup>(3)</sup> situations can seem much worse when you've been drinking. Drinking too much might also make you say things you don't mean to people you care about – especially if you speak to friends or family when drunk.

People may drink alcohol to relieve stress in the short term. But the fact is that in the long term regular drinking actually increases feelings of anxiety.<sup>(4)</sup>

If you drink regularly, you run the risk of relying on alcohol to feel better about your problems. Eventually you may become dependent on it.

People who become dependent on alcohol find:

- it's very hard to get through the day without a drink.
- they have an increased tolerance to alcohol, so they need to drink more to get drunk.
- they suffer withdrawal symptoms, like shaking hands, when they stop drinking.
- they have to drink alcohol to stop these symptoms.<sup>(5)</sup>

Being dependent on alcohol causes a huge amount of stress and anxiety. Relationships with

family and friends suffer. These symptoms can eventually turn into mental health problems like depression, and even lead to schizophrenia.<sup>(6)</sup>

Starting to drink when you are young puts you more at risk of becoming dependent. One American study showed that people who begin drinking before 15 are four times more likely to become dependent on alcohol.<sup>(7)</sup> If you drink alcohol to make you feel better when still young, you're more likely to do it as an adult.

## Hangovers

If you've been drinking heavily to forget your problems, the next day may start with a hangover to remember! Unfortunately, the sore head, dehydration and nausea that arrives as alcohol leaves your body is unlikely to improve your mood.

Getting plenty of rest is a good way to relieve everyday stress. But because alcohol upsets normal sleeping patterns, you're unlikely to wake up feeling refreshed. Going without sleep means your problems may then look worse than they really are.

## Alcohol and suicide

Sadly, some people feel that suicide is the only way to put an end to their problems. At the moment, suicide accounts for almost a quarter (23%) of the deaths of people aged 15–24. It's the second most common cause of death in this age group after accidental death.<sup>(8)</sup>

The reasons a person decides to end their life can be complicated, but scientists have discovered that alcohol often plays a major part. One study of suicide victims aged 12–19 found that almost

three-quarters (70%) had a history of alcohol or drug abuse.<sup>(9)</sup>

**Remember**, if you ever feel that you can't cope, **help is available**. You can call The Samaritans free any time of day or night on 08457 909090.

## Staying safe

Whether you're worried about exams, stressed about future plans, or being bullied, try not to panic. It's OK to feel sad or under pressure sometimes, and there are plenty of ways to make yourself feel better without turning to alcohol.

Problems always feel worse bottled up – so try and share how you feel with other people. Chatting to your friends, parents or a school counsellor can make you feel much better.

Getting active helps your brain and body feel great. That's because exercise releases endorphins, which are the body's natural 'feel-good' hormones.<sup>(10)</sup> You don't have to be into the gym, a quick game of football or netball will also help you beat the blues.

Even if you're not feeling energetic, there are lots of other ways to get rid of stress without drinking. Meeting up for a fun day out with friends, getting lost in a book, watching a good movie, or listening to some music all make great stress-busters.

## Advice on alcohol

**Know the rules** Government guidelines recommend men stick to no more than three to four units of alcohol (that's two pints of beer or four single vodkas) per day, while for women it's no more than two to three units (one 175ml glass of wine or three single vodkas). Alcohol can hit young people harder than adults so, if you do drink, aim for less.

**Slow down** If you do choose to drink, matching every alcoholic drink you have with a soft drink will help you stay sober and avoid becoming dehydrated.

**Eat up** Food slows down the absorption of alcohol into your bloodstream. Have a big meal before you go out and eat a few snacks along the way to help you stay sober.

**Look out for friends** Drinking can make you very emotional. If you see a friend having a hard time take them to one side and find out what's up.

## Where to go for more information

You can get support and advice to help you through whatever you're facing at The Site ([www.thesite.org](http://www.thesite.org))

Need to Know ([www.needtoknow.co.uk](http://www.needtoknow.co.uk)) has the facts about everything from bullying to boy/girlfriend problems.

Get sussed about all aspects of emotional health with YoungMinds ([www.youngminds.org.uk](http://www.youngminds.org.uk)).

Drinkaware ([www.drinkaware.co.uk](http://www.drinkaware.co.uk)) has all the latest facts on how alcohol affects your emotions, plus advice on how to manage your drinking sensibly.

### References

- 1 Cornah, Dr D 2006, 'Cheers? Understanding the relationship between alcohol and mental health'. Mental Health Foundation
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Meister, K et al 2000, 'The Health Effects of Moderate Alcohol Intake in Humans: An Epidemiological Review', *Critical Review in Clinical Laboratory Science*, vol 37, no 3, pp 261-296
- 4 Cornah, Dr D 2006, 'Cheers? Understanding the relationship between alcohol and mental health'. Mental Health Foundation
- 5 Edwards, G et al 1976, 'Alcohol Dependence: Provisional Description of a Clinical Syndrome', *British Medical Journal*, vol 1, no 6017, pp 1058-1061.
- 6 Cornah, Dr D 2006, 'Cheers? Understanding the relationship between alcohol and mental health'. Mental Health Foundation
- 7 Grant, B F and Dawson 1997, 'Age At Onset Of Alcohol Use And Its Association With DSM-IV Alcohol Abuse and Dependence: Results from the National Longitudinal Alcohol Epidemiologic Survey', *Journal of Substance Abuse* vol 9, pp 103-110.

- 8 2007, 'Office for National Statistics Mortality Statistics', no 30 + no 32.

- 9 Shafii et al 1985, 'Psychological Autopsy of Completed Suicide in Children and Adolescents', *American Journal of Psychiatry*, vol 142, no 9, pp 1061-1064.

- 10 Thore, P et al 1990, 'Endorphins & Exercise: Psychological Mechanisms and Clinical Implications', *Medicine & Science in Sports*, vol 22, no 4, pp 417-544.

Contents approved by Drinkaware Chief Medical Adviser, Prof. Paul Wallace BSc (Hons), MSc, MBBS, FRCGP, FFPHM

Drinkaware  
7-10 Chandos Street  
London  
W1G 9DQ  
0207 307 7450  
The Drinkaware Trust  
Registered in England and Wales No. 4547974  
A company limited by guarantee  
Registered Charity No. 1094586