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wellbeing, ability, recovery

# ALCOHOL AND MENTAL HEALTH

Alcohol affects the brain and can cause varying mental health side effects that can result from drinking excessively. It's always tempting to reach for a glass of wine or head to the pub when you're feeling stressed or have had a hectic day at work. It's normal to want to relax after a challenging day, however, opting for an alcoholic drink to try to relieve tension or mask anxiety or depression is probably a bad choice. While initially alcohol can lift your mood there are serious effects both short term & long term that can lead to severe mental health issues.

Alcohol is a depressant, once the alcohol starts to wear off you may start to feel agitated in the short-term and in the long-term issues like depression, memory loss, and even suicide are a real possibility. Always try to stick to the recommended guidelines of no more than 14 units per week with an aim for several alcohol-free days. If you are feeling low already it's best to avoid alcohol completely.

## The Facts:

### 1. Alcohol alters your brain chemistry

Our brains rely on a delicate balance of chemicals and processes. Alcohol is a depressant, which means it can disrupt that balance, affecting our thoughts, feelings and actions – and sometimes our long-term mental health. This is partly down to 'neurotransmitters', chemicals that help to transmit signals from one nerve (or neuron) in the brain to another. The relaxed feeling you can get when you have that first drink is due to the chemical changes alcohol has caused in your brain. For many of us, a drink can help us feel more confident and less anxious. That's because it's starting to depress the part of the brain we associate with inhibition.

But, as you drink more, more of the brain starts to be affected. It doesn't matter what mood you're in to start with, when high levels of alcohol are involved, instead of pleasurable effects increasing, it's possible that a negative emotional response will take over. You could become angry, aggressive, anxious or depressed.

### 2. Alcohol can actually increase anxiety and stress rather than reduce it

Unfortunately reaching for a drink won't always have the effect you're after. While a glass of wine after a hard day might help you relax, in the long run it can contribute to feelings of depression and anxiety and make stress harder to deal with. This is because regular, heavy drinking interferes with neurotransmitters in our brains that are needed for good mental health.

When we drink, we narrow our perception of a situation and don't always respond to all the cues around us. If we're prone to anxiety and notice something that could be interpreted as threatening in the environment, we'll hone in on that and miss the other less threatening or neutral information. For example, we might focus on our partner talking to someone we're jealous of, rather than notice all the other people they've been chatting to that evening.



### 3. Alcohol + depression = a vicious cycle

If you drink heavily and regularly you're likely to develop some symptoms of depression. It's that good old brain chemistry at work again. Regular drinking lowers the levels of serotonin in your brain – a chemical that helps to regulate your mood. In Britain, people who experience anxiety or depression are twice as likely to be heavy or problem drinkers. For some people, the anxiety or depression came first and they've reached for alcohol to try to relieve it. For others, drinking came first, so it may be a root cause of their anxieties.

Drinking heavily can also affect your relationships with your partner, family and friends. It can impact on your performance at work. These issues can also contribute to depression. If you use drink to try and improve your mood or mask your depression, you may be starting a vicious cycle...

Warning signs that alcohol is affecting your mood include:

- disturbed sleep
- feeling lethargic and tired all the time
- low mood
- experiencing anxiety in situations where you would normally feel comfortable.

Four ways to help prevent alcohol affecting your mood

- Use exercise and relaxation to tackle stress instead of alcohol.
- Learn breathing techniques to try when you feel anxious.
- Talk to someone about your worries. Don't try and mask them with alcohol.
- Always be aware of why you're drinking. Don't assume it will make a bad feeling go away, it's more likely to exaggerate it.

### 4. Alcohol is linked to suicide, self-harm and psychosis

Alcohol can make people lose their inhibitions and behave impulsively, so it can lead to actions they might not otherwise have taken – including self-harm and suicide. More than half of people who ended up in hospital because they'd deliberately injured themselves said they've drunk alcohol immediately before or while doing it. Extreme levels of drinking (such as more than 30 units per day for several weeks) can occasionally cause 'psychosis'. It's a severe mental illness where hallucinations and delusions of persecution develop. Psychotic symptoms can also occur when very heavy drinkers suddenly stop drinking and develop a condition known as 'delirium tremors' – symptoms include body tremors and confusion.

#### Did you know?

Anxiety and depression are more common in heavy drinkers – heavy drinking is more common in those with anxiety and depression.



## 5. Alcohol can damage your memory

Soon after drinking alcohol, your brain processes slow down and your memory can be impaired. After large quantities of alcohol, the brain can stop recording into the 'memory store'. That's why you can wake up the next day with a 'blank' about what you said or did and even where you were. This short-term memory failure or 'black out' doesn't mean that brain cells have been damaged, but frequent heavy sessions can damage the brain because of alcohol's effect on brain chemistry and processes. Drinking heavily over a long period of time can also have long-term effects on memory. Even on days when you don't drink any alcohol, recalling what you did yesterday, or even where you have been earlier that day, become difficult.

### Here are three ways you can cut back and keep your drinking under control:

1. Try alternative ways to deal with stress. Instead of reaching for a beer or glass of wine after a hard day, go for a run, swim or to a yoga class, or a talk to a friend about what's worrying you.
2. Keep track of what you're drinking. Your liver can't tell you if you're drinking too much, why not try the Alcohol & You drink checker, use our drink diary or both to help keep tabs on your alcohol consumption.
3. Give alcohol-free days a try. If you drink regularly, your body starts to build up a tolerance to alcohol. This is one of the main reasons why it's important to consider taking regular breaks from drinking. Test out having a break for yourself and see what positive results you notice.





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