



**connect**  
wellbeing, ability, recovery

# ALCOHOL & STRESS

Life can be very stressful. Many people use alcohol to relax and to combat the effects of stress. We might tell ourselves that alcohol will reduce our stress... and to begin with, it might seem to help us relax. However, using alcohol in this way can lead to a vicious cycle of problems. If we use alcohol as a treatment for something that is wrong in our lives, without doing anything positive about the underlying problem, the drinking may become a further problem. The more we drink, the more drink we need to feel “relaxed” – this can lead to a dependency. Drinking alcohol reduces our inhibitions – we may behave in ways that we might later regret. Alcohol affects our judgement – we may make inappropriate decisions.

## Effects on Mood

Alcohol affects mood. Even small amounts can amplify emotions making us feel more relaxed, merry, aggressive, or depressed and suicidal when we are drinking. Drinking alcohol when we are worried or feeling down can make us feel even worse. Our moods affect our behaviour, both at the time, and afterwards. The day after drinking alcohol can especially make feelings of anxiety and depression worse. We may feel anxious and depressed which may lead us to drink again to cope. Hangovers make concentration harder and even simple tasks more difficult. Alcohol disrupts sleep, leaving us tired and irritable. Knowing we are drinking too much can be stressful in itself. Drinking can result in stressful financial difficulties.

## Drinking in Response to Stress

When your body perceives or experiences stress, it responds by secreting hormones into your blood in an attempt to cope with the stressor. This stress response affects the way your body functions and alters your body temperature, appetite, and mood. This is one reason some people turn to alcohol after a stressful event. In many cases, people will turn to alcohol when a stressful situation feels out of their control. A number of factors, including genetics, usual drinking behaviour, experiences with alcohol or other drugs, and social support, are factors in determining whether a person will drink during a stressful situation.

## Alcohol's Effects on Stress

Some studies have found that alcohol itself can actually trigger the stress response. But other studies suggest that low levels of alcohol can reduce stress, tension, and anxiety. Moderate drinking has even been shown to improve your mood. So, which is it? Does drinking help or exacerbate stress? Although low doses of alcohol have been shown to reduce stress, research has shown that alcohol induces some of the same physiologic effects as other stressors. A standard drink measures the amount of alcohol, not the amount of liquid you're drinking – because it's the alcohol content that is most important to track. One standard drink equates to 10 grams of pure alcohol.



Your liver can only remove roughly one standard drink per hour

## ALCOHOL GUIDELINES

Men

No more than 3 - 4 units per day  
No more than 21 units in one week

Women

No more than 2 -3 units per day  
No more than 14 units in one week

## Hazardous Drinking

Men

40+ units per week

Women

28+ units per week

Small glass wine (100ml) = 1 unit; Pub measure of spirits (35.5ml) = 1 unit; Glass of lager (284ml) = 1 unit. The units are average levels – strength of drink varies by brand.

Guidelines are for adults. We all need at least 2 days a week without alcohol. There is no known 'safe amount' for under-18s. If you drink, don't drive.



Stress happens when the pressure and challenges of our lives exceed our ability to cope. Alcohol is not a healthy way of dealing with stress. Drinking to deal with stress can interfere with work, relationships, finances, and lead to more problems, like alcoholism and health complications. If you find yourself in a stressful situation, it is important to have coping strategies that don't involve drinking.

## Effects on Mood

Alcohol affects mood. Even small amounts can amplify emotions making us feel more relaxed, merry, aggressive, or depressed and suicidal when we are drinking. Drinking alcohol when we are worried or feeling down can make us feel even worse. Our moods affect our behaviour, both at the time, and afterwards. The day after drinking alcohol can especially make feelings of anxiety and depression worse. We may feel anxious and depressed which may lead us to drink again to cope. The following strategies are recommended:

## Better Ways to Cope

It's okay to be stressed sometimes – it happens to everyone. What is important is to deal with it in positive ways. Don't wait until things feel “out of control.” By then, you may no longer know that you need help. Physical activity can help to improve the way we feel about ourselves and our bodies, boost mood and concentration, aid sleep and reduce reactions to stress. Here are some suggestions:

- Aim to get at least 30 minutes exercise three times a week.
- Do something you enjoy that stops you thinking about daily concerns for a while, like playing sport making music.
- Taking regular breaks stops things getting on top of us.
- Share your worries – Talking through problems helps get worries in perspective. Writing things down can help too
- Learn to say ‘no’ – Be clear about where your limits are and how much you can realistically take on. If you say ‘yes’ to everything and breakdown under the pressure, you'll be of no use to anyone, yourself included.
- Plan ahead – Take one thing at a time. If your workload seems unbearable, pick one urgent task at a time to work on. When you finish that task, choose another.
- Problem solving – Stress is often caused by problems in our lives. Pinpoint what they are and identify small steps you can take to improve the situation.



## How to Say ‘No’... To Drinking

Start by simply saying no. Drinking is a choice and with any luck this will be enough, although as the night goes on friends who took no for an answer when sober may try to get you to start drinking later after they have had a few drinks themselves. Announce your intention to abstain early. This shows that you are confident about your stance and came prepared. If people think that there is a health-related issue that causes you not to drink, they will be less likely to pressure you. You could be on medication. Offer to be the driver to take everyone home. There is nothing wrong with choosing not to drink, and you shouldn't have to lie, but if it eases the situation, it might be the best option at the moment. You could say that you have somewhere to be later, or early the next morning, and that it is important you do not drink. If you think it will be hard for you to say no, plan to arrive late and leave early so you'll be less tempted to drink. If you're still being pressured to drink and are feeling uncomfortable, leave the situation.

## How to Say ‘No’... And Mean It

- Saying ‘no’ doesn't mean you don't like them, you're just refusing their demand.
- Be honest, calm and polite. It will help you keep control. People are happier to accept an honest ‘no’, than be faced with indecision and a delayed refusal.
- Don't apologise. Be direct and succinct. Simply say “No, no thank you”.
- Repeat the simple statement of refusal again and again. No explanation, just repeat it





Discover more information on our website:

**[www.inspireconnect.info](http://www.inspireconnect.info)**