

Concerned about someone's drinking?

Alcohol and your health



The Alcohol and Your Health booklets

This booklet is one of the six booklets in the Alcohol and Your Health series.

Each of the booklets is written for a particular group. Four are for the drinker experiencing problems, one is for those close to the drinker, and one is for practitioners working in a brief intervention setting.

The series Alcohol and Your Health (2013) is by Ian MacEwan and is the fifth edition of the series originally called Your Drinking and Your Health written by Ian MacEwan and Greg Ariel, and based on concepts developed by the Scottish DRAMS project.

The Alcohol and Your Health series includes:

Is your drinking okay?

Cutting down

Stopping drinking

Maintaining the change

Concerned about someone's drinking?

Helping with problem drinking

Introduction

This booklet is for you if you are concerned about someone else's drinking. It gives you some ideas about what you may be able to do to help.

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Part 1

Understanding the problem

How much is too much?

You may have heard people say things like:

"I'm only a social drinker."

"I only drink beer, never spirits."

"I never drink on my own."

"I don't drink any more than my friends."

"I never drink before five o'clock."

Even if all of these are true, someone may still drink more than is sensible or safe, or in a way that causes problems. One question people often ask is, *"Are they an alcoholic?"* Some people will be upset at being labelled an alcoholic and this can prevent them from looking for help for their drinking. For this reason, it may be useful to ask instead, *"Is their drinking the cause of problems for themselves or for other people?"* Others, however, may welcome the explanation for their drinking getting out of control.

Measuring the amount of alcohol in drinks

Alcohol is measured in many ways. One of the easiest ways is to convert the amount drunk into standard drinks (SDs).

Each SD contains the same amount (10 grams) of alcohol. This amount of alcohol is contained in a half-pint of beer, a small glass of wine or a pub measure of spirits. Therefore each represents one SD.

The table on the next page shows the number of SDs there are in different drinks.



Most wines you buy are 12.5% alcohol, although some are as low as 8% or as high as 15%. A glass (100ml) of 12.5% wine is one SD.

How many standard drinks in different drinks?



* RTD (READY TO DRINK)
ALC refers to alcohol content by volume

Low-risk alcohol drinking advice



Reduce your long-term health risks by drinking no more than:

- 2 standard drinks *a day for women* and no more than 10 standard drinks *a week*
- 3 standard drinks *a day for men* and no more than 15 standard drinks *a week*
AND at least *two alcohol-free days* every week.

Reduce your risk of injury on a single occasion of drinking by drinking no more than:

- 4 standard drinks *for women* on any *single occasion*
- 5 standard drinks *for men* on any *single occasion*

Stop drinking if you could be pregnant, are pregnant, or are trying to get pregnant.

There is no known safe level of alcohol use at any stage of pregnancy.

When not to drink

It's advisable not to drink if you:

- are **pregnant** or planning to get pregnant
- are on **medication** that interacts with alcohol
- have a **condition** that could be **made worse by drinking alcohol**
- feel unwell, **depressed**, tired or cold, as alcohol could make these things worse
- are about to **operate machinery or a vehicle** or do anything that is risky or **requires skill**.

Why people drink

We associate drinking with enjoyment and celebrations. But we also often use alcohol to make ourselves feel better when we're worried or unhappy, or to help us feel more confident with some people or in some situations. When alcohol is used in this way there's a danger it will be relied upon. A drinking habit can build up, and we can become physically dependent on it. This means that we get used to always having alcohol always in our bloodstream. If we stop drinking suddenly, we're likely to develop unpleasant (withdrawal) symptoms and may need medical help.

Some common problems

In families, relationships and friendships where someone is drinking heavily, there may be a number of problems.

- People may drink to deal with stress, but the drinking can make the situation worse. It's a vicious cycle.
- It may be difficult to know how a heavy drinker is going to behave next, which causes tension and uncertainty for those close to them.

- Communication can become difficult.
- Everything can start to revolve around the drinking, if that's the only thing that is thought and talked about.
- Those close to the drinker can feel ashamed of their behaviour and become cut off from everyone outside.
- Practical difficulties may include accidents and money, and sexual, legal and health problems. Some of these, such as sexual problems or incontinence, may be embarrassing to talk about.
- Children understand more about what's going on than their parents realise, and this can be reflected in the way they behave.
- If the drinker no longer takes responsibility for things like paying bills or doing household tasks, other family members may take these over. This can lead to resentment on both sides.
- There may be arguments and violence.

It's distressing if someone you care about is drinking heavily. The following sections will look at what you can do. This includes what you can do to take care of yourself as well as how you can help the person whose drinking concerns you.

Part 2

What you can do: take care of yourself

Worrying all the time about your partner, lover, friend or family member leaves you drained of energy for yourself and anyone else. Both in your own interests and the interests of those around you, take care of yourself.

Being involved with someone with a drinking problem is difficult, so it's important that you have support. Heavy drinking is quite a common problem and many people will understand how you feel. Even if you feel embarrassed, don't be afraid to talk about it. Family and friends may offer help. You could join a group such as Al-Anon, which is a support group for relatives and partners of problem drinkers. Your doctor and alcohol and drug services will also assist. Whatever you do, don't cut yourself off from your friends. Friends are your best support.

It's important that you look after your health. If you get rundown and anxious, you'll become ill. Think about finding ways to relieve the pressure. Also, if you have other things in your life that you enjoy outside the relationship with the problem drinker, you'll deal better with the difficulties and keep a clearer view of the situation.

Looking after me

Think about how you deal with pressure, how you relax and the things in life you enjoy outside the relationship with the person with the drinking problem, then complete the following sentences. Some examples are given to help:

Table 1

The way I deal with pressure is to:

1. Get away on my own.

2. Visit a close friend and talk about it.

3. Go for a run or a walk or do some other exercise.

4.

5.

6.

7.

Table 2

The things in my life that I enjoy doing are:

1. Going to a movie.
2. Spending an evening with friends.
3. Reading or watching TV or gardening or some activity that I can get into.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

Table 3

I can best relax by:

1. Taking the dog for a walk.
2. Leaving the children with a friend.
3. Doing a favourite activity like:
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

Write down these things as a reminder, especially when the going gets tough and the pressure begins to build.

Many people believe that they are able to relax because they spend two or three hours every night watching TV. But this is not the case. Even while sitting in a chair, many of your muscles may be tensed up – even more so if you start thinking about the problems rather than what's on the screen.

Although it may seem strange, it takes effort to relax properly. You have to set up the conditions for your mind and body to relax completely. There are a number of ways of getting yourself to wind down.

Consider the following

1. Active relaxation

Physical exercise is a good way of getting rid of tension. The exercise does not have to be tiring. But if you are to benefit, it needs to be regular, at least two or three times a week.

Exercising can be sociable. Sports and exercise clubs are a good way of combining exercise with a social outing.

2. Passive relaxation

Muscle relaxation and meditation both require mental effort to relax the mind and body. These methods of relaxing should be carried out for 15 to 20 minutes each day to have the best effect. Setting aside this time is not easy, but your efforts to do so will be worth it. Even if meditating seems strange and practising it makes you self-conscious, give it a try. Joining a group is a way of getting started.

Sleep and a good diet are important for your health, wellbeing and dealing with difficulties. If you're not sleeping and have lost your appetite, see your doctor. When you do, tell them of your concerns about someone's drinking and how this is affecting you.

Set limits

Looking after yourself means being clear on what you're prepared to accept from the person who's drinking, and if they overstep these boundaries knowing what you'll do. This is important if there is violence. Make sure you know who to contact and where to go, and you have enough money if you need to leave in a hurry. Do not put up with violence or abuse.

Think carefully, discuss with a trusted friend then write down what these limits will be. A couple of examples are given to help.

Table 1

I will not accept:

- 1. Violence of any kind, either physical or verbal.
- 2. Coming home drunk.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

Table 2

If the above boundaries are overstepped, what I will do is:

- 1. Ring the police and/or stay with a friend.
- 2. Refuse to let him/her inside.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.

Table 3

My supporters are:

1. Women's Refuge	Phone:
2.	Phone:
3.	Phone:
4.	Phone:
5.	Phone:

Be assertive

We are responsible for our own behaviour, so don't accept blame for someone else's drinking. What you are responsible for is your reaction to it. It's not a good idea to try drinking along with them. It won't work as a way of controlling their drinking, and it will make things worse for you.

Standing by your decisions can be difficult, especially if you lack self-confidence, feel shy or find it hard to stick up for yourself.

People who find it hard to be assertive feel embarrassed, frustrated, angry and used. They bottle up their feelings and later explode over some trivial incident. Such 'explosions' worsen relationships that are already fraught with tension and problems.

If this is you, learn to be more assertive. Being assertive will help the drinker to understand clearly exactly what you want and expect from them.

There's not enough space in this booklet to teach you to be fully assertive. However, the following tips will help.

'Confidence' and 'assertiveness' are skills like driving a car, playing an instrument or playing a sport. With training and practice you can behave in a more confident manner. And behaving more confidently makes you more confident.

If you lack confidence, why not behave as if you are confident a few times?

If someone asks you to do something you don't want to do, stop and think. Do you normally say to yourself things like, "*I don't want to hurt his feelings by refusing*" or "*It's too much trouble to refuse, so I'll just do it*"? If so, what you're really saying is, "*I don't want to say no*" or "*I am scared to say no*."

Try it and see. Be assertive. You'll feel better for it. Begin with situations in which you feel comfortable. Your confidence and skills will grow.

But don't go too far. Assert yourself but don't be aggressive and don't do or say things that will put your safety, or the safety of others who depend on you, at risk.

Many places, such as local high schools, polytechnics and community centres, offer assertiveness training classes. These are advertised in community newspapers. If not, a Citizens Advice Bureau will point you in the right direction.

The following books may also be of help: *The Shy Person's Guide to Life* by Michael Bentine, Granada; *Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway* by Susan Jeffers, Arrow.

Part 3

What you can do: how to help

Neither you nor anyone else can make someone cut down or stop drinking, but you can encourage and help them to make changes.

Here are some ideas you may find helpful:

- Talk to the person you're worried about. Find a time when they're sober and when you're both calm.
- Talk about the problems their drinking is causing.
- Listen and find out how they feel and how the drinking helps.
- Don't get into arguments. Arguments, nagging or accusing will make it more difficult for the drinker to talk to you.
- Be clear about what behaviour you will not accept.
- Be clear about what action you'll take if it still happens. Don't make idle threats.
- Be consistent – don't keep changing your mind about what you're saying, and don't say one thing and do another.
- Discuss with other close friends and members of the family what you're trying to do. This will make it easier for everyone to take a similar approach, and it will be less confusing to the person who is drinking.
- Help the person who's drinking to be realistic. Don't encourage promises that can't be kept. For example, the promise "I'll never drink again" is difficult to keep.
- Don't make it easier for them to drink by buying it for them, giving extra money or agreeing to go out drinking. It may be difficult to break these patterns, but they're more likely to take you seriously if your actions match your words.
- Help them see the effects of their drinking. This might encourage change more quickly.
- Don't try to hide the effects from the drinker or other people, eg by phoning work with excuses, clearing up the mess, putting them to bed or missing social events for fear of embarrassment.
- Encourage the person to concentrate on the problems caused by the drinking, rather than using a label like 'alcoholic'.

Understanding change

There are four stages through which a person who is drinking passes before lasting change is achieved. Your help will be effective when matched to the stage where the drinker is at in terms of the change process.

The four stages of change are:

1. I don't drink more than anyone else – no way!

At this stage the drinker doesn't want to look at how much they are drinking and they aren't upset by the negative consequences of the heavy drinking. It is only through changes occurring in the drinker's life that the possibility of a drinking problem begins to be considered.

People at this stage will be resistant to any suggestion that they should cut down or stop drinking. However, you can help the drinker to recognise their problem by encouraging them to consider how the drinking is affecting you.

2. Maybe I am drinking too much

The drinker is now more open to discussion of the problems caused by excessive drinking. They will have begun to draw up the pros and cons of heavy drinking.

At this stage, listen to the drinker. Talk to each other about the drinking, especially the sense of ambivalence surrounding it (I should stop but I don't want to/can't).

3. I definitely need to cut down/stop

After thinking things over, which may take some time, the person gets to the point of deciding to do something about it. The drinker needs to believe that they have the ability to change. Your support to assist with cutting down or stopping will be important.

4. I don't want to slip back – I'm in control

Cutting down or stopping drinking is half the struggle; the problem drinker must maintain the gains they've made.

They'll benefit from your support to avoid or cope with situations that make relapse more likely as well as how to guard against the danger of a gradual return to heavy drinking.

The *Maintaining the change* booklet from this series provides advice on avoiding relapses.

Relapses are common. The drinker may try several times before they achieve any lasting success. Understanding and accepting the 'wax and wane' nature of change will help you to feel less frustrated when the drinker doesn't progress as quickly as you're hoping they will.

It's important to determine what stage the drinker is at. The more your help matches the correct stage, the more effective it will be.

For more information on how you might assist the drinker, read the companion booklets from the Alcohol and Your Health series.

Is your drinking okay?

Cutting down

Stopping drinking

Maintaining the change

You'll find suggestions in the last three booklets that will be helpful to you as well as the drinker.

Expectations and goals

Once you've talked openly with the drinker you can agree on what changes you'd like to see. You will both need to compromise. There will be a difference between what is ideal and what is realistic. You may want the person to stop drinking altogether. But if the drinker feels they can cut down, it's a good idea to give this a trial period.

Most people find it easier to stop altogether, but some are able to cut down. Many need to experiment to find out what will work. If the drinker is cutting down, work together and be clear about what's acceptable, eg how much to drink, where, when and with whom, and the behaviour that goes with it:

- no violence
- no threats
- reduce debts
- be home at an agreed time.

If a decision is made to stop drinking, work together to avoid situations in which it might be difficult not to drink.

Read the companion *Stopping drinking or Cutting down* booklet to understand what is happening to the drinker.

Be realistic in your expectations. Drinkers (like smokers) often take several attempts before they make lasting changes.

It is a difficult change to make, so if you can see the drinker is making a serious attempt, support and encourage them, even if things don't always go according to plan. Remember though that you also need to consider yourself, and there is a limit to what you can stand.

What happens in a relationship if the drinker changes?

When someone reduces their drinking, both of you can expect many things to improve (health, finances, etc). However, it is unrealistic to expect that everything is going to be perfect. Your relationship is likely to change in a number of ways.

Up until now, you have had to take on most of the responsibilities in the home/family. Gradually, the person who has been drinking will want to play a fuller part in these things. You may find it difficult to hand over some of the responsibility. You need to find the right balance between making sure things get done and showing your trust. It may be difficult for you to come to terms with the person becoming more independent.

Another thing that might cause problems is the sexual relationship. You will need to adjust to a different sex life if your partner's drinking changes.

Some of the problems you thought were caused by the drinking may still exist. Long-term relationship problems are unlikely to go away overnight.

Be aware that there might be disadvantages as well as advantages for you. If you're prepared for this in advance, the changes made are more likely to be successful for everyone.

Communication is the key to coping with and adjusting to change.

By following the communication problem-solving tips outlined on the next page, you'll be able to have a positive discussion with the person coping with their drinking problem.

Communication problem-solving tips

1. Talk

- choose a suitable time for you both
- choose a suitable place for you both

2. Communicate

- outline your concerns and problems
- be specific
- say how it makes you feel
- outline the changes you would like

3. Listen and talk

- listen to the drinker's response
- don't interrupt, let them finish
- be fair
- compromise

4. Find solutions

- explore all options
- discuss changes you are both prepared to make
- select achievable solutions

5. Make decisions

- be specific about what needs to happen

6. Take action

- do what was agreed

7. Review the decisions

- did they happen?
- did they make a difference?
- if yes, well done
- if no, rethink the solution and try again.
- don't give up.

If at any time your conversation becomes an argument, pause. Say the following or something similar to yourself.

"I care about myself."

"I care about this person."

"I want our relationship to be one that's enjoyable for both of us."

This will help bring your conversation back onto a positive track.

Avoid:

- put-downs and personal attacks
- threats, orders, demands
- saying "YOU always..."; "Every time you..."; "YOU never..."
- dredging up the past as ammunition
- adopting a closed position (making statements that stop further discussion or action)
- not being prepared to see a different point of view
- rambling (dragging in everything and getting off the topic).

Some couples find it helpful to see a relationship counsellor.

Maintaining the change

When someone's drinking first starts to change, the effects may be dramatic and this is rewarding for everyone.

Watch out for the end of this 'honeymoon' period, when things start to become routine. It will take effort to maintain the changes you've both made as the weeks and months go past. Think about:

- who does what in your relationship
- developing and keeping up new interests, both with each other and separately
- giving encouragement and praise and not focusing on the past.

Don't be surprised if there's a return to the previous drinking habit. Changing a drinking habit can be a long process, so don't give up too soon. Assess whether it's a slip (giving in to temptation but still wanting to stop or reduce) or a relapse (giving up). Stick with your drinker if it's the former; seek help from professionals if it's the latter.

Part 4

What happens if there is no change?

There is always a possibility that the person you're worried about will not make the changes you're hoping for. Prepare for this, and have ideas about what to do next. Now is the time to review what you expect and what you're prepared to tolerate.

Think about the changes you could make in your relationship:

- spend less time with the other person?
- re-think your role within the relationship?
- reduce your sense of responsibility for the other person and allow more time for yourself?

Perhaps there are other possibilities. List them:

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

You have a right to an enjoyable and fulfilling life. If someone else's drinking is making your life difficult and there's no prospect of change, you may want to consider parting.

Decisions to separate are neither simple nor easy. Talk with a trusted friend or a trained counsellor. It may help to get your thinking clear.

Whatever you do, working through the consequences for you will help. Draw up a list under the headings shown below.

Consequences of staying

Positive

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Negative

Do the advantages of leaving outweigh the advantages of staying?

Do the disadvantages of staying outweigh the disadvantages of leaving?

Only you can decide.

Consequences of leaving

Positive	Negative
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

In the meantime, here's what to do in an emergency

Medical emergency – if the drinker becomes seriously ill, eg falls unconscious, has a seizure, is hallucinating, call an ambulance immediately.

Phone:

Phone:

Violence – if you're at risk of violence, ensure you have somewhere or someone to go to. Women's Refuge offers help to any woman at risk. Call the Police.

Phone:

Phone:

Children – if children are at risk, call the Police.

Phone:

Phone:

Other emergencies

Phone:

Phone:

Remember

People do stop or change their drinking.

You're not responsible for another person's drinking, but you can play a part in helping that person to change.

Your relationship will be altered and you'll both need to make adjustments.

You have the right to enjoy your life. Take care of yourself and make changes in a relationship that isn't working.

Professional help is available.

Where to get further help

The person who is drinking may be glad of any help that is offered. But if help is refused, it's very difficult to insist. Then get help for yourself.

Counselling services – in all areas a counselling service for problem drinkers and their partners and families is provided by a local alcohol and drug counselling service. Look under 'Alcohol' in the telephone directory.

Self-help groups – Al-Anon exists in some areas. Alcoholics Anonymous is for people who have decided to stop drinking altogether. Al-Anon is for the partners and adult family members of problem drinkers. Other self-help groups may also be helpful, for example women's support groups.

Medical services – your doctor will help. They can refer you and/or the drinker for help.

Community law service – gives advice and support in molestation orders.

Alcohol Drug Helpline – phone free on 0800 787 797. Its counsellors will support you.

Add below other suggestions for getting help:

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Health Promotion Agency

Freephone: 0508 258 258

Email: enquiries@hpa.org.nz

For help contact the Alcohol
Drug Helpline on **0800 787 797**

To order resources visit alcohol.org.nz