



ALCOHOL

CHANGE^{UK}

Alcohol and relationships: how alcohol can affect us and those we love.

Alcohol can affect our relationships in all sorts of ways and can have a negative impact on our own health and wellbeing and that of those we love.

www.alcoholchange.org.uk

Those of us who drink alcohol do so for a variety of ever-changing reasons, including: to relax, to socialise, to de-stress, to have fun, to relieve boredom, to try and cope with or avoid problems including relationship difficulties, because others around us are drinking, because we feel lonely. However, drinking too much and too often can cause or exacerbate all sorts of problems with our physical and mental health, including damaging relationships with our loved ones.

This doesn't necessarily mean that we should avoid alcohol completely, but it is important to understand how alcohol can affect us and our relationships with those around us, and the benefits of cutting down or going alcohol-free.

How does drinking affect our relationships?

Although we don't always think of it as such, alcohol is a psychoactive substance, meaning it can radically change the way we think and feel:

- It can alter both our mood and inhibitions, affecting our decision-making in the moment, meaning we are more likely to make rash choices, or perhaps instigate verbal or physical confrontations that we later regret.
- If our partner or loved one is regularly drinking more than we are, it can impact on our own feelings, creating tension and anxiety. For example, we may feel that we take second place to our loved one's drinking, or that they are increasingly physically or emotionally absent.
- If we are the ones drinking regularly or heavily, we may be neglecting or ignoring the needs of our loved ones, and not fulfilling our responsibilities as a partner, friend, parent or family member.
- It can negatively impact on our sex life.

The quality of our relationships with others can also impact on our own drinking in many different ways:

- When someone close to us drinks frequently or heavily, we might be more likely to do the same.
- Unhappy romantic situations, for example, can exacerbate our drinking as a means to cope with our feelings.
- Household tensions caused by issues like financial worries or family crisis can also be a prompt for us to drink more.
- When we break up with someone we are close to or experience a bereavement, we can find ourselves drinking more heavily and more often to try to cope with the changes in our lives.
- Loneliness – the sense of being disconnected from others – can also act as a trigger for increased drinking.

Regular arguments about your own or your partner's drinking is also a tell-tale sign that alcohol has become a significant factor in your relationship.

Signs that alcohol may be negatively impacting your relationships

- **Alcohol is playing a key role in your relationships:** Many people drink with people who are close to them. But if alcohol is at the centre of your romantic relationships, friendships or relationships with family members, this can become damaging over time, whereby you find yourself unable to have a good time together without alcohol.
- **You are hiding or being dishonest about your drinking:** If you are hiding how much and how often you drink from your partner or loved ones, or pretending to drink less than the reality, then this can cause trust problems in your relationships.
- **Your sex life is less fulfilling:** Whilst alcohol can sometimes increase sexual desire in the moment, it can also result in erectile dysfunction

(i.e. make it difficult to have or keep an erection), limit or prevent ejaculation, and can cause vaginal dryness in some women due to the dehydrating effects of alcohol. It can also reduce sensation and impact on the quality of your communication, leading to a less fulfilling sex life, putting strain on an intimate relationship.

- **Your drinking is causing conflict:** Alcohol can affect mood and decision-making. Regular arguments about your own or your partner's drinking is also a tell-tale sign that alcohol has become a significant factor in your relationship. Alcohol-fuelled arguments can be particularly upsetting for children in the household; some children will feel frightened by their parent's drinking, others embarrassed or left feeling neglected. Alcohol is never an excuse for domestic abuse.

Important note on domestic abuse

This leaflet briefly discusses domestic abuse. If you are affected in any way by domestic abuse, please seek help. If you are in immediate danger, dial 999.

Refuge also provides the 24-hour **National Domestic Abuse Helpline** on **0808 2000 247**. There are many other specialist organisations that can help you. Read our factsheet on Alcohol and domestic abuse to find out more.

Making some changes

When alcohol has become a core part of our relationships, it can stand in the way of us taking action to change our own drinking habits, even when they aren't making us happy. Similarly, we can be affected by the drinking of our partner, friend or loved one, causing

tension and disagreement, or leading us to drink more.

We can also find ourselves using alcohol as a coping mechanism that we have come to rely on, creating the need for us to establish alternative coping strategies.

Tips for healthier drinking and happier relationships

- **Talk it over:** If you're having problems or something is playing on your mind, it's good advice to talk things through when both of you are sober – don't wait until one or both of you has started drinking.
- **Commit to cutting down:** The UK's Chief Medical Officers recommend not drinking more than 14 units a week; that means about six pints of lager or a bottle and a half of wine.
- **Keep track of your drinking:** Recording what you drink for a few weeks will help you understand your drinking pattern so that you can decide if you want to make a change. Use a free app like Try Dry to keep track of your drinking and set goals to help you cut down.
- **Go alcohol-free for a month:** Take time off from drinking by having a Dry January or other alcohol-free break. It's a great way to reassess your relationship with alcohol, and have some sober fun with your loved ones.
- **Ask for help:** Ask for help if you feel you need it, or if you're worried about someone else's drinking. Lots of us struggle with alcohol at some point in our lives and need support to turn things around. Talk to your GP or your local alcohol service, or visit the Alcohol Change UK website to find out more about getting support.
- **Get relationship support:** If your drinking is negatively affecting you or your relationships, get support from Relate. You can access counselling on your own or as a couple.