

Alcohol and mental health

The relationship between alcohol and mental health is complex. Alcohol is sometimes used by people to manage symptoms of anxiety and depression, but excessive drinking is likely to make those symptoms worse. Managing your drinking and getting the right support are crucial to good mental health.

About 1 in 4 people in the UK will experience a mental health problem each year.

Can alcohol affect my mental health?

Alcohol has been described as ‘the UK’s favourite coping mechanism’, and many of us do drink to help manage stress, anxiety, depression or other mental health issues.¹

This is sometimes called ‘self-medicating’ with alcohol. Unfortunately, although alcohol can help us relax and give us a brief feeling of euphoria, the effects are short-lived and the long-term negative consequences of using alcohol in this way can be quite harmful:

- Overuse of alcohol can worsen the symptoms of many mental health problems. In particular, it can lead to low mood and anxiety
- As the immediate feeling of calm after drinking fades over time, you may feel worse than before
- Post-drinking hangovers can be particularly difficult, with the usual headache and nausea being accompanied by feelings of depression and/or anxiety
- Using alcohol in this way can mean that the underlying mental health issues aren’t addressed

If you come to rely on alcohol to manage your mental health issues, that reliance can itself become a problem. You may well find that your drinking starts to get in the way of other activities and puts a strain on your relationships – both things that can undermine your mental wellbeing.

Alcohol and depression

Depression is one of the most common mental health problems, with around one in ten people suffering in the UK in any year.² Depression and heavy drinking have a mutually reinforcing relationship – meaning that either condition increases a person’s chances of experiencing the other.³

For that reason, managing your alcohol intake is one way of reducing your risk of developing depression. If you do experience depression, reducing the amount you drink may help to manage symptoms.

Can I drink if I have mental health problems?

If you struggle with depression and anxiety, or other mental health problems, but would like to drink, the best advice is to stick within the Chief Medical Officers’ guidelines by not having more than 14 units of alcohol per week. That means about six pints of lager, or a bottle and a half of wine, spread out over three or more days and with a few days off.

Some people find that it’s best for them to stop drinking, in order to improve their symptoms. Only you will know what works best for you, but you may wish to discuss it with your doctor or with someone at your local alcohol service.

If you are taking any kind of medication for a mental or physical health condition it’s always worth asking your doctor or your pharmacist whether you can drink alcohol while you’re taking it, and whether they’d advise changing your drinking habits in any way.

There can be long-term negative consequences of using alcohol to cope.

What to do if you’re struggling

If you are feeling anxious, low or experiencing any other symptoms of mental health problems, you deserve support. You can speak to your GP, and get advice and help at www.mind.org.uk.

www.alcoholchange.org.uk

¹ Mental Health Foundation (2006). Cheers? Understanding the relationship between alcohol and mental health.

² NHS website. Overview: alcohol and depression.

³ Adams, S. (2015). Depression in patients with alcohol use disorders.