

# Health & Well-being Mental Health Campaign

## Alcohol and Mental Health



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 is possible that a negative emotional response will take over. People can become angry, aggressive, anxious or depressed.

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.

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. 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.

**Staying in control** - Drinking within the government's lower risk guidelines will help keep your drinking in control. Here are three ways you can cut back:

**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.

**Keep track of what you're drinking** - Your liver can't tell you if you're drinking too much.

**Give alcohol-free days a go** - If you drink regularly, your body starts to build up a tolerance to alcohol. This is why many medical experts recommend taking regular days off from drinking to ensure you don't become addicted to alcohol. Test out having a break for yourself and see what positive results you notice.

Information: <https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/check-the-facts/health-effects-of-alcohol/mental-health/alcohol-and-mental-health>