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For many people, having an alcoholic drink is one of life's pleasures. For most of them that's not a problem, but some people have a troubled relationship with alcohol. The reasons we drink and the consequences of drinking too much are intimately linked with our mental health.

This booklet describes how some people drink to cope with difficult feelings. It suggests alternative coping strategies and outlines the services that support people who want to cut down their drinking.

Why do people drink?

People drink for a wide range of reasons: to celebrate, commiserate or socialise, for courage or to drown their sorrows. We often drink because we want to alter our mood. We may drink to feel more relaxed, as well as more confident. A drink can make people feel better able to cope when they are feeling worried or fed up.

What is self-medication?

For some people going through a tough time, drinking to improve their mood can form a habit that is hard to break. Drinking to deal with a mental health problem such as anxiety or depression is called 'self-medication'. Sometimes people who don't have a diagnosed problem also use alcohol in this way. For instance, problems at work, relationship difficulties and bereavement can all lead us to reach for the bottle.

The effect that alcohol has on how you feel is only temporary. When the drink wears off, you feel worse because of the way alcohol withdrawal symptoms affect your brain and the rest of your body.

Can drinking lead to mental health problems?

Research shows that people who drink a lot of alcohol are particularly vulnerable to developing mental health problems. Many experts believe that alcohol can be one of the factors that cause some mental health problems, including depression.

People with alcohol problems are more likely to face relationship difficulties or physical injury and these things themselves can contribute to poor mental health.

Drinking often encourages people to take risks. Most people who take their own lives have drunk alcohol beforehand. Having alcohol problems increases the likelihood that someone will attempt suicide and that's especially true for men.

It's very common for people with a severe mental illness such as schizophrenia to have alcohol problems too. This may be due to self-medication rather than a direct cause and effect link. People with this kind of 'dual diagnosis' often use alcohol to help them cope with distressing symptoms.

If you drink a lot in the long term, alcohol changes the chemistry of your brain and reduces its ability to deal with difficult feelings naturally. Apart from the damage too much alcohol can do to your body, you become alcohol tolerant, needing more and more alcohol each time to feel the same short-term boost.

If you regularly drink to numb your anxiety, say, your brain will be less able to deal with anxiety naturally. You may then drink more alcohol to deal with your continuing anxiety. Many people who use alcohol to feel less anxious or depressed drink nearly every day and believe they would find it hard to give up.

What is alcohol dependency?

People who become alcohol dependent feel they must drink alcohol either to continue feeling good or to avoid feeling bad. They find it hard to control how much they drink, even when they understand the damage it may be doing to their body and to their relationships. They become more tolerant of alcohol: the more they drink, the more they crave.

Drinking is not a good way to manage difficult feelings and alcohol masks distress rather than tackling its underlying causes. What can you do instead?

How can you cope with difficult feelings in a healthy way?

Because many people turn to alcohol to unwind, it's important to find alternative ways to relax. These include regular exercise, yoga or meditation, taking breaks during your day and making time for activities you enjoy like reading, a walk in the park or going to the cinema.

There are also healthier ways to deal with frustration or anger than drinking them away. For instance, you could vent your feelings through a vigorous workout or take it out on a pillow and, when you are feeling calmer, talk over your situation with a friend.

Eating a well-balanced diet and not smoking also contribute to a feeling of wellbeing that will make you better able to cope when things go wrong.

How can family and friends help?

Talking is a healthy way to unburden difficult feelings. Spending time with people who make you feel good can improve your sense of well-being. Just being listened to can help you feel supported and less alone. Family and friends can help you find other ways to deal with problems and they can keep you company if you're exercising or using other tactics instead of drinking to help you cope.

If you want to cut back on alcohol, avoid situations where you may feel tempted to drink. If you usually socialise over a drink, give some thought to other activities you could enjoy with friends or distract yourself from having one drink after another by playing darts or pool or taking to the dance floor. If your friends understand what you're aiming to achieve, they'll be less likely to badger you to keep drinking.

Changing your habits is often tough. Enlisting the support of people with your best interests at heart may help you change. Their encouragement can be a boost along the way and they can give you the praise you deserve as you reach your milestones.

What help can local services provide?

If your difficult feelings are disrupting life at home or at work, if your feelings dominate your mood over several weeks or if you feel you just can't cope, it's worth seeing your GP or an occupational health advisor at work. They may offer you self-help tips, suggest treatment that may help or refer you to a specialist. Treatment options include regular meetings with a psychotherapist or counsellor, medication or 'exercise on prescription'.

If you think you may be becoming dependent on alcohol, your GP can put you in touch with local services as well as checking your physical health. That may mean an alcohol and drugs advisory service run by the NHS or your local council. These services often include doctors, counsellors, nurses and social workers, offering a range of support from counselling to 'detox' programmes.

Support groups such as Alcoholics Anonymous give you the opportunity to do group work and talk about your personal experience with people experiencing similar difficulties. They may have 'drop-in' times and may also offer alternative therapies such as acupuncture or shiatsu massage.

Some services help people who approach them directly as well as taking referrals from health professionals. Private support services are also available for people who are able to pay.

How easy is it to change?

Seeking professional help may feel like a big step but, with support, it is possible to unlearn patterns of behaviour. You will need to work out which situations and feelings trigger you to reach for a drink. This may involve reflecting on how you react to events that happened long ago or more recently and that can be tough.

It's important you are clear why you want to cut down or stop drinking and how you will benefit in the long run. Changing how you behave takes time, effort and commitment. It is more likely to be successful if you really want to change.

More information and support

NHS Choices

Find out how many units in your favourite drink at
<http://units.nhs.uk/howMany.html>

Al-Anon Family Groups

Support for families and friends of problem drinkers
Confidential helpline: 020 7403 0888 (10am-10pm daily)
Website: www.al-anonuk.org.uk

Alcoholics Anonymous

Information for people seeking help with a drink problem
Confidential helpline: 0845 769 7555
Email: help@alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk
Website: www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk

The Drinkaware Trust

Information on alcohol and drinking
Website: www.drinkaware.co.uk

Dry Out Now

Information on private alcohol services across the UK
Helpline: 0845 370 0203
Website: www.dryoutnow.com

National Association for Children of Alcoholics

Information and support for children whose parents are alcohol dependent.
Free confidential helpline: 0800 358 3456
Email: helpline@nacoa.org.uk
Website: www.nacoa.org.uk

Drinkline

Information and support for callers worried about their own drinking and for their family and friends.
Free confidential helpline: 0800 7 314 314 (24 hours a day, 7 days a week)

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