

Safer Drinking Info Pack

repairing the past, building the future

By Kathryn Hodgson

Disclaimer: This pack is for information only, if you think you may have an alcohol problem please see your doctor.

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Learn to live a happy and fun life without alcohol

Alcohol is a part of life for so many people, but sometimes it can become a problem and have a negative effect on your life.

If you find yourself getting out of control, or doing things you regret due to alcohol it could be worth learning how to drink safely. There are some simple steps you can take within this guide, or you could attend our project for more support (see end of the guide for more info).

Everyone is different so you have to find what works best for you. We can help you speed up this process but in the meantime here are some suggestions. *(please note these are just suggestions, please see a doctor if you have any concerns)*

Safer Drinking:

If you learn how to feel good and deal with problems without alcohol then you will have more control and more choice over your drinking, and will become able to enjoy all the benefits with none of the negative consequences. No matter what your situation this is possible, however you have to be willing to learn how. Reducing your drinking without dealing with why you drink too much will not be easy. Most people use something to avoid negative emotions, it could be eating, smoking, keeping busy etc, and some people use alcohol for the same reason. You are not worse than them for choosing alcohol, just chose something with worse consequences.

If you feel your drinking is a problem one of the easiest ways to get it under control is to stop completely for a while so it loses it's grip. Some of you may choose to stop completely.

If alcohol is your only way to enjoy yourself or deal with problems then you are missing out on a lot in life, and inviting a lot of negative consequences into your life.

Have you ever been drinking and the next day had to apologise to someone for your behaviour?

Have you missed appointments or let someone down due to either drinking or being hung over?

Do you end up short of money because you have spent it on alcohol?

Or even have lost friends or work due to your drinking?

These are signs your drinking may be becoming an issue. It is easier to catch it early than wait for the consequences to snowball, and they will:

Getting in fights, or arrested

Physically being ill – minor and major illnesses

Getting in accidents, injuring yourself or others

Feeling depressed or anxious

Death (estimated 40, 000 pa in the UK are alcohol related)

The UK safe drinking guidelines are a maximum of:

Men - 21 units a week, no more than 4 in one session

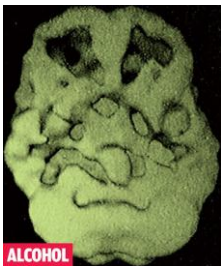
Women - 14 units a week, no more than 3 in one session

(units vary according to the alcohol strength of the drink, a rough guide is 2 units per pint and 1 unit per single measure of spirits/ glass of wine)

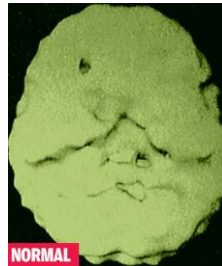
Understanding what alcohol does to you:

Alcohol connects with chemical receptors in your brain that signal you to feel good, so eventually your body will stop doing this naturally as it no longer needs to. This means you begin to believe you need alcohol to feel good. Once you stop drinking it can take a few weeks for your body to resume producing this feeling naturally so you will feel down because of the damage alcohol has done rather than because of how your life is.

It also destroys parts of your brain so that it is physically harder to think and plan, and control your drinking. This will return when you stop. (see below)



10 yrs drinking (& still working)



healthy brain

Our brains learn to do things automatically so that we do not have to stop and think every time we do something. If you drink to solve a problem, ie. to feel better, you are training your mind to automatically see alcohol as the solution to your problems and it will be harder to come up with other options. This leaves you feeling you have no choice as you didn't think about it. It is possible to reprogram yourself to respond differently though.

Additionally heavy drinking depletes your body of what it needs to be healthy so if you stop drinking you may start to feel ill. Likewise you will not be sleeping properly – so it really does a lot of physical damage that you may not notice until you stop. This adds to you feeling down without alcohol, and the temptation to start again. Think of it like

having the flu and just wait it out. Otherwise you will have to go through this, and maybe worse, next time you try to stop.

Drinking alcohol has an accumulative damaging effect on you, so every time you drink you are causing more damage. Often you do not know how much damage until it is permanent. Alcohol use has been linked to a rise in risk of contracting many diseases, including liver damage, heart disease, cancer, diabetes and permanent brain damage.

Part of the effect of alcohol is to cloud your judgement so you think you are in more control of yourself than you are. Drinking means you are more likely to be in an accident or involved in violence.

By learning how to drink safely you can avoid these affects.

Tips on cutting down

Keep a record/ Drinks Diary – it's easy to forget how much you are drinking, and it will also help you notice your patterns of drinking so you can change them.

Try a new drink – go for something with a lower alcohol strength, or even swap for a non-alcoholic drink or fruit juice.

Get hydrated – Drink water or a soft drink between alcoholic drinks, this reduces the effect of the alcohol on your body and will help you cut down.

Habit forming – change your routine and do something different - go out later or leave earlier. Walk a different route etc.

Learn relaxation – it's easier to choose whether to drink or not when you are relaxed.

Get money wise – both in limiting the amount you have on you to spend and also on how much you are spending that could be spent on other things.

Eat before you drink to slow down absorption and your intake.

Recognise if you really do want a drink or have another need. Are you just thirsty and need water? Will relaxation help? Or learning to deal with your emotions?

Tips on stopping completely

If you stop completely and experience tremors, hallucinations, fever, blurred vision, convulsions or black outs you need to drink and reduce slowly as you are physically dependant. Seek medical attention straight away.

- Plan ahead and get prepared. You will feel a strong urge to drink at times you usually do so plan ahead to deal with it (see section on dealing with cravings)

- Keep busy. Sitting around thinking will make it harder. Do anything, even if you don't think it will be fun. Launchpad can help you fill your time, and there are some suggestions later in this pack.
- Your mind will try and trick you into drinking again as it hates to change. Ignore your thinking about drinking, or any negative thoughts also.
- It is natural to feel down when you stop as your body has to adjust to feeling good without it, so wait it out. Give it a few weeks before you decide whether life is worth living without alcohol.
- Your sleep patterns will also take a while to correct, again give it time. For people who drink a lot it can help to imagine it is like having flu – you have to sit and wait for it to go. Drinking will only delay the suffering.
- Be kind to yourself – eat well, rest, exercise, do things that make you feel good etc. You may need to take vitamin B as alcohol specifically depletes this.
- Remind yourself of all the reasons why – the things you want to get rid of and the new life you want.
- Also read about people who have stopped drinking so you can be reminded it is possible to be happier without alcohol. Online stories and resources include <http://wiredin.org.uk/> <http://www.inexcess.tv/>

Cravings

Cravings occur when you feel the urge to drink. Once your body becomes dependant on alcohol it will stop producing feel good chemicals naturally as it has no need to, therefore the only way your body knows to feel good is through alcohol and it will crave it. Eventually your body will start reproducing those chemicals itself and your physical cravings will stop.

Then you are left with psychological cravings, which are a feeling created by your thinking.

How to beat cravings

Our brains develop a short-cut that goes 'see X, feel Y', eg see a spider, panic, see money, crave alcohol etc. If you know what triggers you to drink you can be ready to stop yourself. Triggers can be people, places, objects, situations. Emotions can also trigger you, eg boredom, anger, loneliness etc. Be aware of what triggers you have and then plan ahead to avoid, cope with or escape them. Come up with at least 3 alternative

ways to cope so your brain has a choice. Waiting to get triggered makes it harder to think.

Get support from other people and groups. It is harder when you are alone.

Learn relaxation – it feels good and it is impossible to be relaxed and crave at the same time.

Learn to cope with difficult emotions. They will not kill you and often will just go if you let them. Avoiding them will keep them alive. It's your thinking that creates them so become aware of what you tell yourself. Watch your thinking and distract yourself, or remind yourself of the reasons why you want to stop drinking. Your thoughts are only thoughts, they have no power unless you give them it. You can just ignore them and they will go. If you no longer thought about drinking you would no longer drink.

Healthy living

The stronger you are physically the easier it will be for you to choose whether to drink or not. It will also give your body chance to recover.

- Get enough sleep. Often sleep is disturbed when you drink so it takes time to get back in a good habit.
- Take Exercise. Even gentle walking can strengthen you and it also releases endorphins to help you feel good again. (it will also help you sleep, fill time and feel good about yourself).
- Eat healthily. Sugar triggers alcohol cravings so cut down or avoid it. The healthier you eat the easier it will be to avoid alcohol and feel good again.
- Take vitamins. Alcohol depletes your body of essential vitamins so taking a supplement will improve your health.
- Practise relaxation. We are meant to be relaxed and feel at peace, the more you can do this the less you will need alcohol. And it starts in your mind.
- Get emotional support. Even attending support meetings without talking will support you emotionally, but talking will be even better.
- Find what you love doing. There is something that you love doing and that when you do it you forget everything else and feel alive. You are meant to be doing this, and it will help you stay off alcohol.
- Help others. When we help others we get just as much of a feel good factor as those we help, and it helps you feel useful and have a purpose in life.

Ways to relax

- Aromatherapy balms
- 10 deep, slow breaths
- Stretching, or going for a walk
- Distracting yourself
- Stress comes from the thoughts you are having – focus your thoughts by meditating, or a directed daydream, or by repeating a mantra, or writing
- Write down your thoughts and challenge them
- Remind yourself of all that is good in your life – think of things that make you smile
- Act 'as if' you are relaxed
- Do things slowly, and concentrate on what you are doing
- Listen to relaxing music
- Imagine yourself in the future looking back at now – what would you tell yourself?
- Take a hot bath with candles
- Look at pictures that make you happy
- Get out in nature
- Listen to a relaxation tape
- Do something that absorbs you, eg reading a book, or doing a crossword, or painting

Have a regular practice of things that calm you (this is like going to a gym for your mind):

- Meditate

- Do yoga or tai chi, or exercise
- Eat healthily
- Do things that make you feel good
- Write a journal and gratitude diary
- Drink herbal teas or take herbal relaxation tablets
- Work on challenging your negative thoughts

Things to do for free

- Library – books, papers, magazines, DVDs, CDs, info on lots of things to do. Or look in local papers for info on events, eg free music in the park etc. You can also use the internet for free
- Go to New Directions (in the library) as they have info on college courses and you can join some of them for free and do courses or taster sessions at a reduced rate.
- Do art
- Puzzles
- Write
- Amateur dramatics (acting), these clubs also need people to help behind the scenes
- Sports – join a club or organise your own games
- Organise things to do, plenty of people are bored too, eg board games, trips out, cooking together, picnic etc
- Identify something you are interested in and research it, find out everything you can. Or research something that would help the group.
- Read
- TV/ DVDs
- Music
- Find out if you can work on local nature areas that need tidying up, or go to The Ridgeway Trust
- Relaxation – practise relaxation skills, meditation etc
- Self-development – use the time to work on areas of your life you want to improve (the library has audio books, DVDs, etc to help you)
- Visit your local community centre as they will have details of local clubs and projects that volunteers are needed for
- Volunteer – you can volunteer doing almost anything, so basically you can do something you love doing for free, get trained, meet people and help others.
- Get a passport to leisure, you can access some activities for free.
- Go to AA – safe place and social.

Advice given by clients on alcohol group I run

Take one day at a time, thinking too far ahead will demotivate you

Keep busy, but be aware of not doing too much

Avoid drinking buddies – it's harder to resist.

Keep your thinking positive, and avoid negative thinking

Start dreaming of a better future

Get as much support as possible

Give yourself a break, be kind

Avoid stressful situations, and extreme emotions, until you are stronger. Especially be aware you may set yourself up with excuses to drink by causing arguments etc.

Relapse can be part of the process, not a sign to give up

Commit to it, and recommit every day. This should be your no: 1 priority

Watch out for cravings disguised as hungry, angry, lonely, tired (HALT)

Acceptance – that others will still drink, and that you can't change the past

Remind yourself of the reasons why you want to stop as it is easy to forget

Alcohol is a con artist and will do anything to keep you drinking by influencing how you think. Don't let it win.

Have patience – it takes time to learn how to live without alcohol

Stop thinking the answer to your problems is outside yourself, it is within

Don't catastrophise, ie a small thing becomes the end of the world

Beware of 'friends' who try and keep you drinking

Complacency can lead to drinking creeping back up on you.

Know what triggers you to want to drink and plan an alternative strategy. Do not wait for it to happen.

Look after yourself – eat healthy, relax, rest etc

Stop and think before you do anything, drinking has become automatic and you need to relearn a new way

Educate yourself on the affects of alcohol – how it impairs your thinking for a while after you stop, how it disables you from feeling good naturally until your body adjusts etc.

Hang in there – it always gets better. Listen to stories of people who are further ahead, they always feel happier and healthier

Problems are never as bad to deal with as you think in your head

People will gradually learn to trust you again

You can create a future you love, rather than what you have ended up with

There is so much more to do in life once you stop drinking

This applies to everyone, no matter what lies your mind tells you.

Help lines

NHS DIRECT 08454647 More info is on <http://www.drinking.nhs.uk/>

SAMARITANS 08457 909090

The National Alcohol Helpline - Tel: 0800 917 8282

Drinkline

National helpline providing counselling, support, advice and information. Calls are charged at local rates. Tel: 0345 320202

Alcohol Concern

UK national body on alcohol abuse

Tel: 020 7928 7377

Website: www.alcoholconcern.org.uk/

Email: contact@alcoholconcern.org.uk

Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) International Fellowship of recovering alcoholics with meetings and local groups nationwide.

Tel: Look in your local Yellow Pages or call 0845 7697555

Website: www.alcoholics-anonymous.org.uk/

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