

Managing Alcohol Consumption

Drinking alcohol is often linked with positive associations: social occasions, enjoying celebrations and relaxation. But drinking alcohol can become problematic when we use it to manage our moods or feelings or to increase our social confidence.

Social drinking can be pleasurable, and moderate drinking may even have health benefits for some of us. However, drinking also has some potential downsides. Although it can feel as though alcohol initially acts as a mood-enhancer, it is ultimately a depressant. Heavy drinking is likely to leave you feeling worse rather than better. The more you drink, the larger the quantity you will need to feel the same effects. Over a period of time, habitual over-consumption can have a wide range of consequences—social, psychological and physical.

Being at college presents opportunities to sample all sorts of new experiences. Many of these can also be sources of potential stress and worry. Alcohol can sometimes become a way of managing the trickier emotional experiences of student life. College social life can also seem centered on bars or house parties at times. It may feel as though peer groups support excessive intake or may resist, or even ridicule, any attempt to cut down on drinking.

Experiences at college can encompass risk taking and pushing limits. Being away at college often means that familiar and respected figures that might have offered help and guidance may not be around. Taking time to understand alcohol's effects can help you make informed decisions about alcohol use.

Attitudes about Alcohol

Alcohol can often become associated with some of the issues and transitions that you are facing. Its ability to reduce inhibitions can help you relax and reduce tension, but it also lends itself to being used to avoid or manage difficult situations. Drinking with friends may help you socialize, but over time, if it becomes habitual it can be hard to relax without it.

Reducing or Limiting Intake

Here are some ideas that may help you cut down your intake:

- Use an online tool to learn about how much alcohol is present in different drinks that you consume.
- Keep a diary of your alcohol intake to clarify your pattern of use and quantities. Cutting down works best if you set limits for yourself that you feel you might reasonably stick to. Those limits need to be low enough so that you are not intoxicated because at that point sticking to a limit becomes very difficult.
- Space out your drinks, start drinking later and alternate consumption with non-alcoholic drinks.
- Identify the occasions, times of day, companions or moods when you are prone to excessive use. This might help you learn to avoid trigger points.
- Rather than just focusing on reducing your alcohol intake, think about increasing some other activity. There are lots of different and new opportunities to do something different while you are at college. Some can also be useful ways of managing your emotional experience.
- Try to have 2-3 drink-free days every week.
- The influence of others can be powerful, so use it to support yourself. You may have friends that have been concerned about your drinking, and they can help encourage you to limit your consumption.
- It can be helpful to make a sheet of the pros and cons of drinking in order to clarify whether you are really determined to cut down.

- Make sure to eat some food when you are drinking. Alcohol mixed with food takes longer to absorb than alcohol consumed on an empty stomach.
- It might also help to try to cut down your intake with the support of a group.

Helping Others

It can be extremely distressing if someone you care about is drinking at levels that give rise to problems. Although you can encourage and support them to make changes, ultimately only they can decide (and be prepared) to do the changing.

Some suggestions to help are:

- Allow space for them to talk about anything that may be bothering them.
- Rather than labeling them, help them see the effects that drinking is having on others as well as on themselves.
- Make clear what behavior is unacceptable to you and avoid arguments.
- Try not to cover for them.
- Ensure that the burden of support does not rest entirely on you and that you have time for yourself, too.

Seeking Help

Help is available. Your advisor, medical doctor and the Student Health Center have spoken to others about drinking before—you won't be the first (or last). You are likely to find that they can make useful and supportive suggestions.

Counseling can help you understand and address the personal and emotional aspects of your alcohol intake. The counselors at the Kelly Center can help with any problems that may be associated with drinking excessively and can refer you to specific agencies for help with dependency or medical support.

If you are trying to help others with a drinking or drug problem you can also contact the counselors at the Kelly Center to help give you advice on how to best help someone through the difficult times.