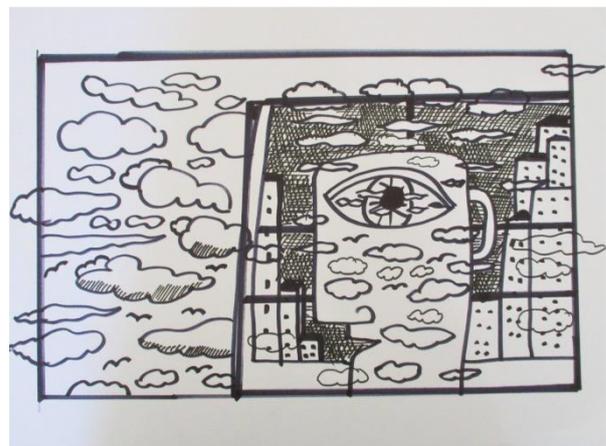


Alcohol Misuse Self-Help Guide

SECTION 1: WHAT IS IT

It will take ~10 minutes to work through Section One

Drinking alcohol to unwind, relax, socialise and celebrate is fairly typical in our society. Problems occur when our relationship with alcohol changes.



Initially, you may not be the one to notice changes in your alcohol use - quite often your family, friends or work colleagues might be the first to comment on changes in your drinking, behaviour or personality. Recognising you might have a problem with alcohol is the first and biggest step to getting the help you need.

You may need help if you:

- Have noticed that you are thinking about alcohol most of the time.
- Are making excuses to have a drink and/or drinking in secret.
- Feel like alcohol is controlling you, that you are unable to, or not wanting to stop drinking.
- Are spending more money than you should, or have, on alcohol.

Finding your way to this page demonstrates your desire and motivation to understand and to take the steps necessary to improve your relationship with alcohol.

By following the strategies and tips in these pages you are taking an important first step toward more control.

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What is an alcohol unit?

It's important to understand and to be honest with yourself and others about how much alcohol you're drinking in order to take back control. Read on to find out more.

How much is one unit of alcohol?

One unit is 10ml or 8g of pure alcohol. Because alcoholic drinks come in different strengths and sizes, units are a way to tell how strong your drink is.

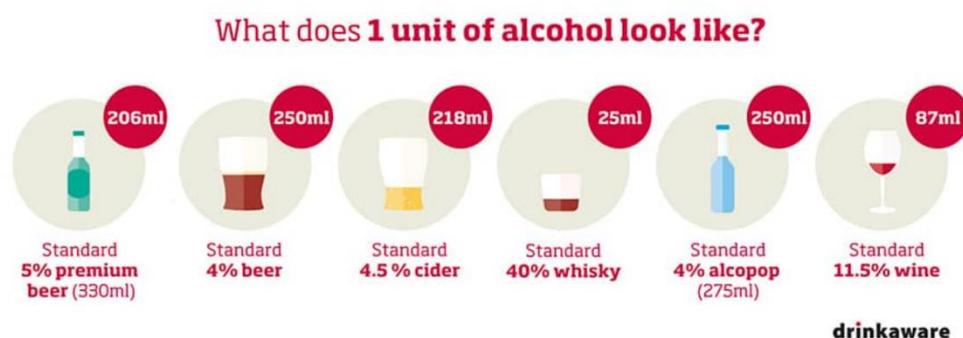
How to calculate your alcohol units?

STRENGTH (ABV) X VOLUME (ML) DIVIDED BY 1000 = UNITS

Example: 12% x 125ml (wine) divided by 1000 = 1.5 units

Government guidance for the safe intake of alcohol for men and women is to remain under 14 units weekly and have a minimum of three non-alcohol days spaced out during each week. If you're regularly drinking more than this, it's time to take action.

<https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/tools/unit-and-calorie-calculator>



The difference between addiction and dependence

Veterans often say to us that they've been told they are addicted to alcohol or that they are alcohol dependent. The words addicted and dependent are often used interchangeably; however it's important to note there is an important difference between them.

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Alcohol Dependence

This is a physical condition. Those dependent on alcohol will experience symptoms of withdrawal such as: tremors/shakes, sweats, vomiting/nausea. These symptoms may begin as little as a few hours without a drink.

NOTE: Withdrawal symptoms can be dangerous and we would not recommend anyone dependent on alcohol ever stopped abruptly - medical treatment is required. If you have any concerns that you may be dependent on alcohol, consult your GP.

Alcohol Addiction

This is a compulsion to drink, even with full awareness of the potential negative consequences. This is because drink very physically makes you feel good by stimulating dopamine release in the brain.

Why might veterans struggle with alcohol misuse?

Throughout history alcohol has been a deep-seated part of military culture, creating social bonds between personnel and aiding 'de-compression' after deployment or difficult life events e.g. relationship breakdown or death of a buddy or family member.

The ability to consume large amounts of alcohol and still perform physically the next day is often revered as a sign of masculinity and strength. Therefore, a veteran's view of the threshold for what constitutes problematic drinking may be higher, and it may feel natural to turn to drink at times of emotional pain and to cope with, numb or avoid distressing experiences from the past.



Here are some of the reasons why veterans have told us they reach for alcohol:

- Habit from their military background
- Problems adjusting to civilian life
- Mental health problems
- As a coping mechanism in an attempt to alleviate symptoms and/or mask the triggers of trauma
- To help forget the past and a way to escape troubling thoughts
- To help with sleep
- Loneliness

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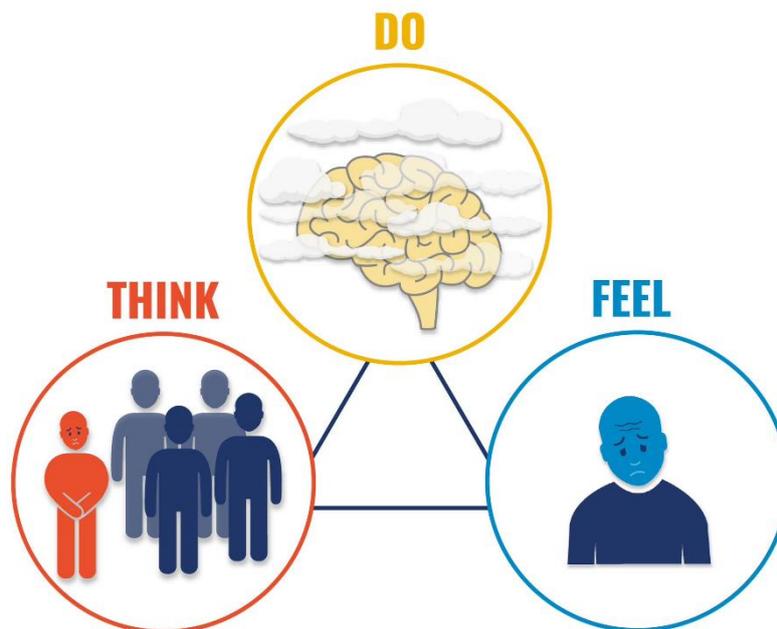
SECTION 2: HOW DOES ALCOHOL MISUSE RELATE TO YOU?

It will take ~15 minutes to work through Section Two

Know your limit – alcohol units

Learning how to count your units of alcohol daily/weekly is a good way to monitor your intake. Fill in this self-assessment questionnaire to help you identify if your relationship with alcohol is about right, or if the amount you drink is risky to your health.

How does ALCOHOL affect you?



THINK:

Alcohol can affect your thought process and make life harder:

- You might feel you lack in concentration
- You might feel you struggle with your short- or long-term memory
- You might be preoccupied with alcohol
- Severe self-criticism, self-punishment and blame
- Thinking that others are judging you/will be critical of you if you ask for help

Before moving on, note down some of the ways your thoughts focus on the negatives about you, others or the future. How are they related to your drinking? Do they increase or decrease with your drinking.

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FEEL:

Alcohol can and will change how you are feeling with continuous overuse - you might experience:

- Lack of energy and motivation
- Poor sleep
- Increased irritability anger and impulsivity
- Increased anxiety.
- Powerful feelings of guilt and shame

Before moving on, pay attention to your body. What physical sensations or feelings do you feel or recognise when you want/need a drink. Note how you would describe it to someone.

Do:

There may be things that have happened in your past that you are trying to forget and it feels that drinking is the only way to do so, or that you can only sleep if you've taken a drink. Being around crowds or just adapting to civilian life may feel overwhelming and so you may find that you are having a drink to 'take the edge off':

- Have you noticed the following?
- Prioritising drinking over other activities
- Separating yourself from others
- No longer doing what you used to before drinking
- Taking less care of yourself
- Finding it difficult to ask for help

Before moving on, note down some of the things that you were doing that you no longer are, or relationship that are struggling because you are drinking.

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SECTION 3: WHAT TO DO TO REDUCE YOUR ALCOHOL INTAKE

It will take ~15 minutes to work through Section Three

Improving your wellbeing

Here you will find new skills to safely reduce your alcohol intake and tips to support you on your journey to having more and more days alcohol free.

We recommend you try the strategies for a couple of weeks, at least, before you are really going to know if they help or not.

The recommended strategies include:

- **Do what matters:** The doing part
- **Get your thinking straight:** The thinking part
- **Listen to your body:** What your body needs

To begin, read the rest of this section 'Do what matters' and, once you've given yourself time to trial this method, move on to Section Four: Get your thinking straight.

Do what matters



Structure and routine

Structuring your day is important as this will help keep you motivated.

Count your units and start a drinks diary to stay on track.

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Distraction

If you know you finish work and the first thing you do when you get home is open that bottle of beer, distract yourself with maybe having a shower first, walking the dog, taking up that hobby that you used to love doing.

For each alcoholic drink you pour, pour yourself a glass of water, soda or juice and drink these between your alcoholic beverage - this will slow your consumption.

Change strong beers or wines for ones with a lower strength (ABV in %). This information is found on the bottle or can.

Set a budget on what you are going to spend on alcohol and stick to it.

Have a time limit in your mind to when you are going to have your last drink of the evening.

Try a smaller glass to drink out of.

Remember, not every idea will work for everyone, they are designed to give you a place to start and help you find what works for you. So do try each method individually and give yourself time to adjust and practice before moving on to the next one.

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SECTION 4: THE THINKING PART

It will take ~15 minutes to work through Section Four

Here you will find new skills to safely reduce your alcohol intake and tips to support you on your journey to having more and more days alcohol free.

Get your thinking straight

Challenge your mindset

All too often, thoughts like "I can't stop", "I need a drink" or "just one won't hurt..." can prevent someone from overcoming their reliance on alcohol and giving in to the urge is seen as confirmation, hammered home by self-critical, self-punishing or shaming thoughts.

Challenge your mindset:

- You can reduce your alcohol
- You do not "need a drink"

Give yourself a break! Be kind to yourself, reducing alcohol or stopping altogether takes will power and support. Take it step by step.

Use a drink diary (Link below) to understand and counter your triggers to increasing your alcohol intake e.g. if alcohol consumption is triggered by boredom, why not start up a new skill, try a creative pursuit such a painting, photography, cooking or writing.

Before moving on, and over the next week or so fill in your drinks diary once you have learned how to calculate your units and start reflecting on how you've done each day.

Remember, not every idea will work for everyone, they are designed to give you a place to start and help you find what works for you. So do try each method individually and give yourself time to adjust and practice before moving on to the next one.



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SECTION 5: WHAT YOUR BODY NEEDS

It will take ~15 minutes to work through Section Five

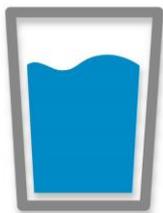
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Serotonin

Drinking alcohol regularly lowers the levels of serotonin in the brain - this is the chemical that helps regulate our mood. Regular use of alcohol results in a snowball effect and can lead to: lack of motivation; anger; poor sleep; anxiety; self-neglect; irritability or agitation; thinking about suicide; and anger outbursts. Here are a few ideas to natural increase your levels of serotonin.

- Exercise - this can be going for a gentle run to a full work out.
- Go out for a walk in the countryside or the beach if you've one nearby.
- Write down in a journal a positive thought for the day or something that made you laugh.
- Add almonds, cashew nuts or pecans to your diet, try to eat fish such as salmon too.



The liver and its needs

Alcohol is broken down by the liver, one of the largest and most complex organs in the body. Your liver stores vital energy and nutrients, creating proteins and enzymes needed to maintain good health and breaks down harmful toxins such as alcohol.

Some examples of how excess or long-term use of alcohol can affect your physical health are: heart problems; diabetes; liver disease; cognitive impairment; weight gain; lack of energy and motivation; increased anxiety.

Make sure you are eating the right foods to get the right nutrients and get the right vitamins.

- Add more protein and fish to your diet.

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- Increase your calcium intake.
- Put more high-fibre in your diet including leafy vegetables, whole grains, beans and peas.
- Remember your daily water intake and aim for at least 2.5 litres a day.



People often ask why do I crave a drink knowing it causes all these symptoms? This is because dopamine, known as the motivational chemical, is boosted with alcohol and this is our reward system - the brain is tricked into thinking it's feeling great.

Over long term use, the structure of the brain changes causing you to crave alcohol and sets a foundation for dependency.

Rather than drinking to increase dopamine, here are a few ideas to boost your dopamine levels naturally.

Try to do things you enjoy, maybe start up a hobby you have been saying you will for a while- pleasure increases your dopamine and will help to lift your mood.

- Exercise - this will also increase blood flow to the brain giving you an added memory booster.
- Listen to music you enjoy stimulates dopamine release in your brain.
- Meditate - this can be through mindfulness.
- Sunshine or being out in daylight- try and get at least 30 minutes outside a day.

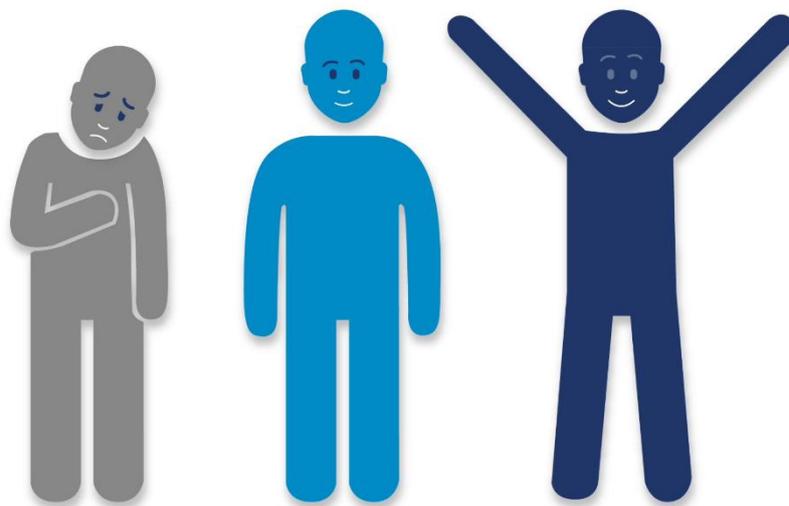
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SECTION 6: REMEMBER SLOW PROGRESS IS BETTER THAN NO PROGRESS

It will take ~10 minutes to work through Section Six

Be kind to yourself. You should NEVER stop drinking alcohol abruptly if you are drinking above the Government guidelines, ALWAYS seek medical advice.



What to do next?

If you are using alcohol to cope with mental health problems such as PTSD, depression, anxiety, or grief, then you may want to try some of our other resources. Each contains a series of coping strategies which you may in time be able to introduce and use instead of reaching for the bottle.

However, before moving on to your next resource, it's important you take time to reflect on what you've learnt here and take time to implement your new methods. Give yourself time to adjust to your 'new normal' before moving on.

Some questions you might have

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What to do if I'm still struggling with alcohol misuse?

It might take some time to start reaping the rewards of your efforts. As with any new skill, keep at it and you will find it easier to use these skills when you need them. While these resources aim to give you some tools to manage your difficulties in-the-moment, for many of you this will only be the beginning. With this in mind, Combat Stress also provides specialist treatment programmes to help you tackle the past and take on the future. If you would like to know more, you will find the details of our 24-hour helpline below.

You can also contact your local GP practice

How do I know what resource to do next?

You may remember when you first began these self-help guides, you filled out a questionnaire. This questionnaire enables us to guide you to the resources that will be most helpful to you. You'll find links to any further recommended resources at the bottom of this page. For a complete list of other Self-help guides in this series, [click here](#).

Is there someone I can contact if I need more help or information?

If you're a veteran and need to talk to someone, or you're a family member/carer worried about the mental health of a loved one who has served, please call our Helpline.

The Combat Stress 24-hour Helpline provides free confidential advice and support to veterans and their families. Don't struggle in silence.

Call 0800 138 1619

You can also contact your GP for help and advice.

Are there any other resources that may help me?

- NHS Northumberland, Tyne and Wear online self-help materials - www.cntw.nhs.uk/home/accessible-information/easy-read/self-help-guides/
- NHS Alcohol support - <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/alcohol-support/>
- Talk to Frank - www.talktofrank.com
- Drink Aware - www.drinkaware.co.uk
- www.wearewithyou.org.uk - previously known as Addaction, 'We Are With You' provide a specialist drug, alcohol and mental health programme for people from the armed forces. Named 'Right Turn'. There are now 10 Right Turn projects in place, positioned in areas of highest demand. In addition to trained staff, Right Turn also invites veterans into services to share their personal recovery tools with others and give peer support

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Urgent help

If you require more urgent help, either yourself or a member of your family feel unsafe, please contact your GP or telephone 111.

This information was publishing on 30 October 2020.

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