

Coping strategies: alcohol

Introduction

We all experience stress and emotional pain in our life, but we all cope in different ways.

Coping mechanisms and coping strategies are things we do to try and protect ourselves from stress, anxiety, trauma, or any other mental health challenge. They could include anything from scrolling our mobile phones and running marathons to excess drinking or gambling. The aim of these behaviours is always to escape the emotional discomfort we're experiencing.

Some coping strategies may help in the short-term, but go on to cause harm longer term. Some coping mechanisms don't have the same long-term cost on our health.

Ideally, any coping behaviour would lead to the problem being resolved in a way that reduces stress and harm. You can find tips and advice on beneficial coping strategies, good self-care, and wellbeing in our resources [here](#).

This resource considers some coping strategies that might cause longer term harm or distress. With these types of coping strategies it helps to be mindful of how you use them, in order to avoid longer term harm. Not everyone who enjoys an alcoholic drink after a stressful day will become an alcoholic, but it's beneficial to be aware of when a habit stops being helpful.

We'll explore how to spot the signs of harm in yourself or a colleagues and where to get support if it's needed.



What are these coping strategies?

We're all human, and it is not uncommon to cope with the stress and difficult life events with behaviours that don't necessarily benefit us in the long term.

These may include:

- Self-harm or risky behaviour
- Addiction - to drugs, alcohol, gambling
- Over eating, emotional eating or binge eating
- Alcohol consumption - including excessive drinking outside of regular social situations
- Spending and shopping - in a way that harms your financial situation or home life
- Gambling in bookies or, increasingly, online

The examples above are generalisations and people may use other coping strategies.

Generally, a behaviour can be defined as destructive if engaging in it leads to some kind of harm to you or others.



A note on coping strategies that support you

Education Support has a range of **resources** to help you look after yourself and prioritise your wellbeing – even during times of great stress.

It's important to remember that it is definitely possible to learn new coping strategies if you're worried that yours are causing you harm. An important starting point is awareness of your stress levels, and how you usually cope.

If you are engaging in harmful behaviours to help you cope with difficult situations, or are worried about how you are coping, professional support may help.

Sometimes a feeling of shame can prevent us from seeking support, so finding a trusted person – professional or otherwise – to talk things through can be a helpful starting point.

“

Shame hates it when we reach out and tell our story. It hates having words wrapped around it - it can't survive being shared. Shame loves secrecy.


Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection*

Below are a few examples of alternative coping strategies that it can be helpful to explore if you are worried that your current ones aren't helping you.

There are many more and these are often personal to people. Finding out what works for you is an important part of managing your wellbeing.

- Spending time with people you care about and who care about you e.g. close colleagues, friends and family
- Doing activities you enjoy or following your passions
- Exercise and keeping active - this doesn't have to be marathon running, just moving your body in a way that's enjoyable

- Finding people you can trust to talk to about any worries you may have
- Caring for your body by feeding it enough of the nutrients it needs
- Giving yourself permission to rest properly – not all your time has to be dedicated to doing things
- Relaxation, mindfulness and meditation

 If you would like to take action to change your coping strategies but don't know where to start you can **phone the Education Support Helpline for free:**

UK-wide: 08000 562 561 day or night

Text: 07909 341229 (answered within 24 hrs)

Alcohol as a coping strategy

What is it?

Alcohol has been described as 'the UK's favourite coping mechanism'. Many of us drink to try to manage negative feelings, from stress and overwhelm to social anxiety and shyness.

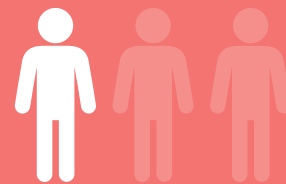
Numerous studies have indicated that we drink to cope with a range of life events and experiences, including economic stress, job stress and marital discord. Alcohol reduces inhibitions and memory function and increases feelings of relaxation, so when used as a coping strategy, is done so to help people escape or distance themselves from the stress or problems they are facing.

While a drink after work or with dinner is commonplace and often fun, for many it can make our negative feelings worse in the long-term.

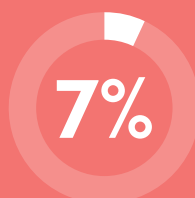
The Covid-19 pandemic has caused many people to change their relationship with alcohol. According to Alcohol Change:



21% have been drinking more often during lockdown. Heavier drinkers are less likely to have cut down.



More than **1 in 3** of us are taking active steps to manage our drinking.



7% of current or former drinkers have stopped drinking completely in lockdown.

Alcohol and your mental health

The relationship between alcohol and mental health is complex. Alcohol is sometimes used to manage symptoms of stress, anxiety or depression. This is because it provides a short term feeling of relaxation due to the increase in feel good brain chemicals like dopamine and serotonin.

Unfortunately, excessive drinking is likely to make any existing stress or anxiety worse. Some examples* of how this occurs include:

- As your body processes the alcohol you've drunk, the feelings of relaxation wear off. You can begin to experience alcohol withdrawal symptoms and these can mimic depression or anxiety.
- If anxiety is already an issue for you, experiencing withdrawal from alcohol can make your symptoms feel worse.
- If you're prone to social anxiety, you might find yourself obsessing over what you said or did the night before.
- Alcohol also disturbs your sleep and you may wake in the middle of night (as the alcohol wears off) and lie awake worrying and feeling stressed.
- Hangovers often come with feelings of depression or sadness, making 'day to day' things like being at work or with family, challenging.

Drinking to alleviate stress is sometimes known as 'self-medicating' with alcohol. The long-term negative consequences of drinking a lot over a long period of time not only harm us but can also mean that the underlying issues causing us to drink are left unaddressed.

If as a teacher or member of staff at a school, you find yourself coming to rely on alcohol to manage work related or other stress, this reliance can become a problem. Drinking excessively can put a strain on all other parts of your life including work or relationships, which will also undermine wellbeing.



Have you ever examined your relationship with alcohol? How beneficial is it overall?



*SOURCE: drinkaware, www.drinkaware.co.uk/facts/health-effects-of-alcohol/mental-health/alcohol-and-anxiety

When does drinking become an unhealthy coping strategy?

There are differences between social drinking, harmful drinking and using alcohol as a coping strategy, which can often lead to a dependency. For education staff, who thrive in collegiate environments and often benefit from socialising together at work or after work, understanding these different types of drinking and recognising what they look like, is an important part of ensuring healthy drinking habits are maintained, particularly in times of high stress at work.

It is possible to develop addiction from social use and this isn't uncommon. People can enjoy alcohol for many years and then find themselves using it not so much as an accompaniment to social activity but as a way to mask feelings of stress or anxiety, or to give them a 'high' to alleviate stress.

It's really important to remember that many people enjoy alcohol safely on a regular basis with no negative side effects. Nonetheless being able to spot the signs when drinking becomes a problem – and to honestly evaluate our own relationship with alcohol – is important for anyone working in a high stress content, or with existing mental health challenges.

Social Drinking

Consuming non-excessive amounts of alcohol, often with colleagues, family or friends at social occasions, or at home.

Harmful Drinking

A regular pattern of drinking which leads to something which does you harm.

Examples of this might be drinking too much and then getting involved in an argument or falling and hurting yourself.

In terms of your mental health, it may also include making obsessive thoughts or anxiety worse.

Dependency

Where alcohol is consumed excessively, regularly, and with little regard its effects on our bodies, minds and lives.

Alcohol reduces inhibitions and memory function and increases feelings of relaxation, so when used as a coping strategy, is done so to help people escape or distance themselves from the stress or problems they are facing.

Staying alert to patterns of dependency: enjoying alcohol consciously

Being aware of your stress levels and the way you manage situations in school and at home is vital for staying mentally healthy. It may also help you to keep potential alcohol problems at bay, by remaining aware of your relationship with it.

The symptoms and signs of alcohol misuse will vary from person to person but there are some signs which it is important to be aware of:

- Often feeling the need to have a drink, at different times across the day
- Often drinking more or for longer than you originally intended
- Get into difficult situations because of your drinking e.g. if you're late for work or meetings or if people can't get hold of you
- Other people speak to you about your drinking and raise concerns
- You think your drinking may be causing you problems



Physical, mental and social symptoms of alcohol dependency can include:

- A lack of interest in previously enjoyable day to day activities, including spending time with loved ones, friends or enjoying hobbies
- Feeling the need to drink more in order to achieve the same effects
- Being tired, unwell or irritable as a result of alcohol use
- Not being able to say no to offers of a drink
- Hiding evidence of your alcohol consumption from others
- Spending an increased amount of time sourcing, using and recovering from the effects of alcohol
- Becoming unable to fulfil commitments at work and home because of alcohol use

As some of the symptoms listed above can also relate to mental health problems or stress, it's important to think of looking after your overall wellbeing including ensuring you maintain healthy drinking habits.

What are the next steps

Managing your drinking and getting the right support if you need it are crucial to good mental health. It is possible to treat and stop the use of alcohol as a coping strategy and alcohol dependency.

Realising there is a problem is the first step to getting help.

For yourself:

If you are concerned for yourself, then the best thing to do is to seek support and if necessary treatment for alcohol dependency. If you need treatment you're entitled to NHS care, and visiting your GP is a good place to start. They can discuss your problems with you and get you into treatment, including potentially referring you to your local alcohol support services. You can search for your local alcohol services [here](#). If you think you may have a problem with alcohol then this [Drink Aware tool](#) offers a short questionnaire to help you understand the extent of the issue and what to do next. If you'd like to reduce your drinking then here are [nine different ways](#) you could do this.

For your colleagues:

If you are concerned for a colleague at school, then be aware that shame and stigma can often prevent people from acknowledging any potential issue with alcohol. It is important to broach any conversation with kindness and curiosity.

Below there are some sources of support for people who are close to those experiencing problems with alcohol. You may also want to talk to a Union representative, confidentially, about what steps to take next.



You don't need to be an expert or qualified professional to be able to listen or signpost a colleague to support if they need it.

Spotting signs in others

Remember: spotting warning signs does not automatically mean a person is struggling with alcohol. Always approach colleagues with kindness and curiosity.

But there are some specific behaviours that might be more commonly observed at work, especially if you work very closely with someone:

- Overconsumption of alcohol at work social events
- Changes and decreases in reliability / increased absenteeism
- Repeated incidents of harmful drinking when drinking with colleagues e.g. conflict
- The smell of alcohol on a colleague
- Mood swings or frequent strong emotional reactions
- Falling asleep at work, or constantly appearing to be very tired or have headaches
- Frequent trips to the bathroom or any private space or break room
- Withdrawing from the team, department or staff social activities, when previously very sociable
- Difficulty concentrating or recalling details
- Struggling to follow instructions or unusual amount of time needed to complete routine tasks

If you do decide to have a conversation with a colleague about what you've noticed here are some suggestions of how to do this in a safe way:

- Make sure you speak in a private place where you won't be interrupted
- Do not have the conversation in front of any other colleagues, including those in management
- Remember that most people misuse alcohol because they are struggling: be kind
- Do not use accusatory or judgemental language and keep an open mind at all times
- Present your concern for their wellbeing and their job security
- Stick to the facts about the behaviours or patterns you have noticed
- Ask what you can do to help
- Signpost to support using information [here](#)

For school leaders:

Employers, including schools, can benefit from developing and enacting a policy on alcohol and other substances in consultation with staff or health and safety representatives. Do you have one?

This is sometimes included as part of wider occupational health and safety policies, including stress management policies. These policies should recognise that excessive stress, which can be caused by very heavy workloads, unclear or unreasonable demands of staff, or workplace conflict, can lead to the development of unhealthy coping strategies such as alcohol dependency.

Policies should include employers obligations to look after employees' wellbeing and what support is available to anyone who may be experiencing alcohol problems

If you are in a position within your school to suggest, lead or contribute to stress awareness, including management with alcohol usage, then you are helping to contribute to a safe environment where people can share their problems.



This is a list of nine things people can do to reduce their drinking is a very useful place to signpost to.

Coping strategies sources:

1. careinmind.com.au
2. www.mentallyhealthyschools.org.uk





Alcohol sources:

1. www.beatingaddictions.co.uk/am-i-dependent-have-i-got-addiction.html
2. www.nhs.uk/live-well/alcohol-support/
3. www.beatingaddictions.co.uk/difference-between-social-use-addiction.html
4. www.verywellmind.com/the-link-between-stress-and-alcohol-67239
5. psychcentral.com/lib/stress-and-drinking#1
6. alcoholchange.org.uk/alcohol-facts/fact-sheets/alcohol-and-mental-health
7. mountainside.com/blog/alcohol/how-to-break-the-cycle-of-stress-and-alcohol-dependence/
8. www.drinkaware.co.uk/advice/how-to-reduce-your-drinking/i-would-like-to-reduce-my-drinking
9. www.drinkaware.co.uk/facts/health-effects-of-alcohol/mental-health/alcoholism
10. www.alcohol.org/alcoholism/

Seeking help - specific sources of support for alcohol issues

You could use this [signposting template](#) to create a specific tool for your school to include some or all of the support options below, which include support for those who live or work with people with alcohol dependency:

-  **Alcoholics Anonymous (AA)** is a free self-help group. Its "12 step" programme involves getting sober with the help of regular support groups.
-  **Al-Anon Family Groups** offers support and understanding to the families and friends of problem drinkers, whether they're still drinking or not.
-  **Adfam** is a national charity working with families affected by drugs and alcohol. Adfam operates an online message board and a database of local support groups.
-  **DAN 24/7** - a bilingual English and Welsh helpline for anyone in Wales in need of further information or help relating to drugs or alcohol. Also known as the Wales Drug & Alcohol Helpline.
-  **Drinkaware** hosts a range of information and support on alcohol use / misuse.
-  **Drinkline** is the national alcohol helpline. If you're worried about your own or someone else's drinking, you can call this free helpline in complete confidence. Call 0300 123 1110 (weekdays 9am to 8pm, weekends 11am to 4pm).

-  **DrugWise** - information about drugs including alcohol and tobacco.
-  **NHS Live Well** - advice, tips and tools to help with health and wellbeing.
-  **The National Association for Children of Alcoholics** (Nacoa) provides a free, confidential telephone and email helpline for children of alcohol-dependent parents and others concerned about their welfare. Call 0800 358 3456 for the Nacoa helpline.
-  **SMART** Recovery groups help people decide whether they have a problem, build up their motivation to change, and offer a set of proven tools and techniques to support recovery.
-  **We Are With You** is a UK-wide treatment agency that helps individuals, families and communities manage the effects of drug and alcohol misuse. Call 0808 8010 750.

