

# How to Prevent Alcohol-Related Problems

## A Self-help Booklet

### Who is This Booklet For?

This booklet is not only for people who have drinking problems, it is also for those people who are drinking smaller amounts of alcohol but are drinking enough to be at risk of developing future health problems.

The advice given in this booklet will help both those people who have drinking problems and those who want to prevent future problems. The booklet provides:

- Advice on low-risk drinking limits
- Good reasons for drinking at low-risk level
- Advice on changing habits

The emphasis is on changing habits and preventing future problems.

### Contents

- What is low-risk drinking?
- How you can change your drinking habits?
- Good reasons for drinking less
- High-risk situations
- What to do when you are tempted
- People need people
- What to do about boredom
- How to stick to your plans
- Guidelines for Helpers
- Creating your habit-breaking plan

### What is Low-Risk Drinking?

Low-risk drinking involves limiting alcohol use to amounts and patterns that are unlikely to cause harm to oneself or others. Scientific evidence indicates that the risk of harm increases significantly when people consume more than two drinks per day and more than five days per week. Moreover, even smaller amounts of alcohol present risks in certain circumstances. Following the simple rules below can reduce the risk to your health and the possibility you might hurt someone else:

- Have no more than two drinks of alcohol per day
- Drink no more than five days per week
- Do not use any alcohol at times when you:
  - Drive or operate machinery
  - Are pregnant or breast feeding
  - Are taking medications that react with alcohol
  - Have medical conditions made worse by alcohol
  - Cannot stop or control your drinking

Ask your health care worker for more information about situations in which you should limit your drinking.

These low-risk drinking limits are based upon "standard" measures of alcohol. It is important for you to determine how much alcohol is in each beverage you usually drink. Most bottles and cans of beer have about the same amount of

alcohol as a glass of wine or one shot of distilled spirits. When you think about how much you drink, be sure to count standard drinks.

If you have been drinking above these limits, you risk causing harm to yourself and others. Having three or more drinks on one occasion creates risks of “accidents” involving injuries, problems in relationships and at work, and medical problems such as hangovers, sleeplessness, and stomach problems. Drinking more than two drinks per day over extended periods may cause cancer, liver disease, depression, and dependence on alcohol (alcoholism).

Fortunately, most people can stop or reduce their drinking if they decide to do so and work hard at changing their drinking habits. The following sections will tell you how.

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## How You Can Change Your Drinking Habits

When people successfully change their habits they usually follow a simple plan. This manual will help you to produce a sensible drinking plan. If possible, try to get somebody to help you. Perhaps a friend or a relative, a health worker or member of your religious community would be willing and able to help you work out a plan and stick to it. Ask that person to read this booklet first.

**The reason for getting somebody else to help is simply that two heads are better than one. Also, they will be able to provide some support.**

**Another way of using this manual is to get together with one or two other people who also want to change their drinking habits.**

Of course, many people change their habits without help from others. If you are unable to get somebody else to help, then work out a plan by yourself.

First, you should ask yourself the following questions:

- How will I benefit if I cut down on my drinking?
- How will my life improve?

The next section will help you to answer these questions.

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## Good Reasons for Drinking Less

Based upon recent research on the effects of alcohol, here is a list of benefits that you can reasonably expect if you cut down on your drinking. Read through them and choose three that seem to be the best reasons to you. Choose the ones that make you want to cut down.

## If I drink within low-risk limits

- I will live longer--probably between five and ten years.
- I will sleep better.
- I will be happier.
- I will save a lot of money.
- My relationships will improve.
- I will stay younger for longer.
- I will achieve more in my life.
- There will be a greater chance that I will survive to a healthy old age without premature damage to my brain.
- I will be better at my job.
- I will probably find it easier to stay slim, since alcoholic beverages contain many calories.
- I will be less likely to feel depressed and to commit suicide (6 times less likely).
- I will be less likely to die of heart disease or cancer.
- The possibility that I will die in a fire or by drowning will be greatly reduced.
- Other people will respect me.
- I will be less likely to get into trouble with the police.
- The possibility that I will die of liver disease will be dramatically reduced (12 times less likely).
- It will be less likely that I will die in a car accident (3 times less likely).
- FOR MEN: My sexual performance will probably improve.
- FOR WOMEN: There will be less chance that I will have an unplanned pregnancy.

- FOR WOMEN: There will be less chance that I will damage my unborn child.

When you have chosen three good reasons for cutting down on your drinking, make a note of them in the spaces provided at the end of this booklet under "Creating Your Habit-Breaking Plan."

Now you should have a clearer picture in your mind of exactly what you expect to happen if you continue to drink heavily and a clearer picture of your future if you stop drinking or drink within low-risk levels.

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## High-Risk Situations

Your desire to drink heavily probably changes according to your moods, the people you are with, and whether or not alcohol is easily available.

Think about the last time you drank too much and try to work out what things contributed to your drinking. What situations will make you want to drink heavily in the future? For example, here is one person's list:

- Situations in which other people are drinking and I am expected to drink.
- Feeling bored and depressed, especially on weekends.
- After a family argument.
- When drinking with my friends.
- When feeling lonely at home.

Use the following list to help you identify four situations in which you are most likely to drink too much:

Parties	Particular people
Festivals	Tension
Family	Feeling lonely
Bars	Dinner parties
Mood	Boredom
After Work	Sleeplessness
Arguments	Weekends
Criticism	After receiving pay
Feelings of failure	When others are drinking

When you have chosen the four dangerous situations or moods that give you the most trouble, write them down in the pages provided at the end of this booklet under "Creating Your Habit-Breaking Plan." The next task is to work out ways of dealing with these situations without drinking more than the recommended limits.

## What to Do when You are Tempted

In this section try to answer the question: How can I make sure that I'm not tempted to drink too much and, if I am tempted, what can I do to stop myself?

This task is not easy but you may find it easier if you get another person to help and together you go through the following steps:

- Choose one of your four high-risk situations.
- Think of different ways of avoiding or coping with it.
- Select two of these ways to try out. Write them down in Creating Your Habit-Breaking Plan at the end of this booklet.

Here is one man's attempt to work out a way of coping with the temptation to drink with friends after work.

### High-Risk Situation

Drinking with friends after work.

### Ways of Coping Without Drinking too Much

- Go home rather than drinking
- Find another activity, e.g., exercise
- Limit the number of days drinking after work with friends
- Have only two drinks when drinking
- Switch to non-alcoholic beverages after two drinks
- Change friends
- Work later

Two that I will try:

- Limit the number of days drinking after work with friends
- Switch to non-alcoholic beverages after two drinks

Notice that some of the ideas probably would not work. This doesn't matter when trying to produce ideas. Just think of as many as you can and then decide which ones are the most likely to work for you. When you have selected two ways of coping with your first high risk situation, move on to the next one so that you end up with two ways of coping with each of the four high-risk situations.

The next area of your life that you should think about is the relationship that you have with other people. If you can increase the number of times each week that you enjoy the company of other people (without drinking above sensible limits), then you will not need to use alcohol as much.

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## People Need People

The first point to remember is that most of us need other people. We need to socialize. Secondly, one of the best ways of encouraging yourself to drink at low-risk levels is by having friends who drink within low-risk limits. Thirdly, you will increase your chances of making new social contacts if you put yourself in situations where you will meet new people. Therefore, the next task that you should set for yourself is to think of ways of putting yourself in such situations. Again, use the method of thinking of as many ideas as you can and then choose two that are most likely to work for you. Here is an example:

## Problem

To put myself in situations where I will be involved with other people who drink within low-risk limits.

## Ideas

- Join a club
- Help with religious activities or the Community Center
- Help out at my son or daughter's school or Youth Club
- Join a voluntary organization (e.g., helping the handicapped)
- Invite people home more often
- Visit relatives more often

Write down the two ways of meeting other low-risk drinkers that you choose under Creating Your Habit-Breaking Plan.

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## What to Do about Boredom

Many people drink because they are bored. If boredom contributes to your drinking beyond low-risk limits, your task in this section is to think of as many activities as you can that might hold your interest and then select two of them to try. Use the following questions to help produce this list.

- What types of things have you enjoyed learning in the past? (e.g., sports, crafts, languages)

- What types of trips have you enjoyed in the past? (e.g., to the ocean, to the mountains, to the country)
- What types of things do you think you could enjoy if you had no worries about failing? (e.g., painting, dancing)
- What have you enjoyed doing alone? (e.g., long walks, playing a musical instrument, sewing)
- What have you enjoyed doing with others? (e.g., talking on the telephone, playing a game)
- What have you enjoyed doing that costs no money? (e.g., playing with your children, going to the library, reading)
- What have you enjoyed doing that costs very little (e.g., going to a park)
- What activities have you enjoyed at different times? (e.g., in the morning, on your day off work, in the spring, in autumn)

Write down the two activities that you choose under Creating Your Habit-Breaking Plan.

The two ways of avoiding boredom to try:

- Join a community group (in the library, church, women's organization etc. or adult education course like crafts, painting, etc.)
- Exercise regularly (swimming, jogging, etc.) or join a sport club

## A Note on Depression

Many people drink because they are depressed. Depression is characterized by feelings of sadness, loss of interest in activities, and decreased energy. Other symptoms include loss of confidence and self-esteem, inappropriate guilt, thoughts of death and suicide, diminished concentration, and disturbance of sleep and appetite.

If you have felt depressed for two weeks or more, you need to get help from a health worker. Treatment does help. During treatment for depression you should stop drinking, as alcohol is a depressant drug that will delay your response to treatment.

## How to Stick to Your Plans

First of all, complete and save the section on Creating Your Habit-Breaking Plan. This is your master plan for the next few weeks. You must go over your plan each day. If you don't, you will just forget about it, especially when you are faced with a dangerous or tempting situation. Here is the best way of insuring that you keep your plan in mind.

- Think of an activity that you do several times every day (e.g., drinking a cup of coffee, washing your hands).
- Whenever you carry out that activity (e.g., drinking coffee), very quickly go over the plan in your mind. Think about your drinking plan, reasons for cutting down, dangerous situations and ways of coping with them. Also think of your

plans for meeting other people and beginning interesting activities.

- If you have a helper, talk about your plan and progress every day at first and then several times a week as you have success sticking to it.
- If your plan is clearly in your mind, then it will help you to change. If it is only on paper it will have no effect at all. Here are a few other tips:
  - Remember that every time you are tempted to drink too much and are able to resist, you are breaking your habit.
  - Whenever you feel very uncomfortable, distressed or miserable, keep telling yourself that it will pass. If you crave a drink, pretend that the craving is like a sore throat that you have to put up with until it goes away.
  - If you have a helper, tell that person honestly how much you had to drink each day and when you have been successful or have drunk too much.
  - Finally, it is likely that you will have some bad days on which you drink too much. When that happens, DON'T GIVE IN. Remember that people who HAVE learned to drink at low-risk levels had many bad days before they were finally successful. It will get easier in time.

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## Guidelines For Helpers

It is sometimes easier to read a booklet and work out a plan for changing habits with the help of somebody else. Two heads are sometimes better than one. That is why we have encouraged people

who are using this manual to ask somebody else to go through it with them. If you are willing to help in this way then you might find it useful to bear in mind the following points:

- This booklet has been produced with two types of drinkers in mind. Some are already having problems with drinking and want to change. Others are drinking smaller amounts of alcohol that put them at risk of developing problems. They have been advised to cut down in order that future problems can be avoided. Prevention is better than cure.
- The main aims of the manual are to find good reasons for drinking less and also to develop other activities instead of drinking.
- Changing habits is a difficult task but you can help in two ways. First, you can help with the exercises provided in the booklet. Second, you can provide encouragement and support.
- Try not to criticize the person you are helping, even if you get annoyed and frustrated with his or her behaviour. Remember that changing habits is never easy. There are bound to be good weeks and bad weeks. Your encouragement, support of low-risk drinking or abstinence, and creative ideas are needed.