

Alcohol and Stress: What's the Connection?

Coping psychologically with a traumatic event is a challenge for everyone. In fact, many people continue to feel stress and anxiety after these traumatic events; some may even feel greater stress and anxiety. People experiencing a traumatic event may even develop a post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), an anxiety disorder brought on by exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal. Chronic stress and PTSD can trigger or exacerbate alcohol abuse problems. Previous research has shown a strong association between PTSD and alcohol consumption.

The following facts demonstrate why it is important to abstain from alcohol in response to a stressful situation or event, what concerns do alcoholics need to be aware of, and how to avoid using alcohol when stressed.

Abstain From Alcohol In Response To A Stressful Situation

- Research indicates that stressful events may profoundly influence the use of alcohol.
- People may drink as a means of coping with certain stressful feelings such as:
 - Financial problems
 - Marital problems
 - Job stress
- It is important to be aware that using alcohol in reaction to a stressful event or situation may increase the risk of alcohol abuse.
- There are several risk factors for alcohol abuse in reaction to stress, these factors may include:
 - Using alcohol to “deal” with stress
 - Experiencing the stressful situation or event as severe, chronic (recurrent), intense, or unavoidable
 - Lacking social support or other resources for coping with the stressful situation or event
 - Having a family history of drinking in response to stress
 - Believing that alcohol will help to reduce stress
 - Having unhealthy or problematic drinking habits preceding the stressful situation or event
 - Feeling helpless or having no control over the stressful situation or event
 - Trying to avoid or numb feelings in reaction to the stressful situation

Concerns Alcoholics Need To Be Aware Of

- Among abstinent alcoholics, personally threatening, severe, and chronic life stressors may lead to an alcohol relapse.
- An alcoholic may resume the use of alcohol after a lengthy period of abstinence to try to lessen the stressful feelings.
- Those most vulnerable to a relapse tend to be alcoholics who have low levels of coping skills, self-efficacy, and social support.

Avoiding Using Alcohol When Stressed

- Get screened and/or evaluated for an alcohol problem, either at a National Alcoholic Screening Day Site or at a local substance abuse treatment provider. (For more information check the resources below.)
- Learn what constitutes “at-risk” levels of drinking. Here are the drinking rates for an “at-risk” man and woman:

Man

> 14 drinks per week or
> 2 drinks per day on average

Woman

> 7 drink per week or
> 1 drink per day on average

- Incorporate alternative ways of coping with stress other than consuming alcohol. Some suggestions include:

- Taking a bath
- Taking a walk
- Listening to relaxing music
- Calling a friend
- Taking a nap
- Doing any other relaxing activity

RESOURCES

*Substance Abuse
Programs and Services*
Kara Bowling, Coordinator
SUB 1 Room 219 K
703-993-3687
<http://www.gmu.edu/student/hwc/saps/>

Counseling Center
SUB 1 Room 364
703-993-2380
<http://www.gmu.edu/departments/csdc/>

Health Education Services
Judy Palmore, Coordinator
SUB 1 Room 219 C
703-993-3690
<http://www.gmu.edu/student/health/>