

How to know if your pandemic drinking is getting out of hand, and what to do about it

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A glass of wine or beer is a relaxing way to end the day, but in these times of COVID-19 stress, is it possible to drink a little too much?

Casual drinking could tittle into something more if we aren't mindful of it, said psychologist Becky Ponting, a University of Alberta counsellor who often helps students concerned about their alcohol use.

"The part of our brain that controls complex decision-making goes offline under intense pressure, so we are more given to impulses such as drinking too much alcohol," she said.

Besides the stress of money and job worries people are facing, boredom from [self-isolation](#) can have us reaching for multiple servings of liquor.

"People are now faced with the inability to do their usual pastimes, and to some extent there's a lack of access to our social supports. We can't meet friends for coffee or a movie or go to the gym, and that contributes to feelings of isolation."

Jokes and memes circulating on social media

about coping through booze can also send the wrong message, Ponting noted.

"A vulnerable person could conclude that everyone is drinking heavily now, and it's portrayed as cute rather than potentially concerning. And it can be difficult to see all these jokes, too, if someone is trying to abstain," she said, adding that stress can be a powerful trigger for relapsing into addiction.

She said relaxing with a favourite drink can provide some short-term benefits, adding "a bit of a party atmosphere to what is a difficult time, making it less bleak.

"If people are having a lot of fear about the health and safety of their loved ones, drinking provides a temporary reprieve from those thoughts and emotions."

But heavy imbibing can lead to feelings of depression, anxiety and restlessness, disrupt sleep and decrease the effectiveness of some medications. When drinking becomes chronic, it can complicate health conditions like diabetes, cancer and high blood pressure.

Research has also shown that alcohol can impair the function of immune cells in the lungs and upper respiratory system, Ponting noted.

"It's something to keep in mind in the middle of this pandemic."

Drinking can also get in the way of finding healthier ways to cope with stress.

"Although drinking can change how we feel in the moment, there are drawbacks if it is used as our only tool for coping. Social isolation may last months, so we want to think about the toll extra alcohol can take on our bodies and overall well-being. It's helpful to consider what will keep us healthy long-term.

"Ask yourself if your drinking has increased since social isolation started and take a moment to reflect on the pros and cons and whether that is working for you."

To do that, she advises completing the sentence, "If I have a drink right now, I will feel (blank)."

"By filling in that end of the phrase, it gets to the root of the need you are trying to fill and that can help you see through cravings. For instance, if the phrase is, "I will feel like I'm having fun," how can you have fun without the alcohol? If the phrase is, "I will feel less afraid," you could consider some counselling to help get to the root of that anxiety."

It's a concept that can also be applied to other habits that can get away from us, like online shopping, gaming, overeating or smoking, she added.

"These behaviours provide a sense of enjoyment, and right now we are all looking for some kind of diversion and relief. But they are healthiest when used only occasionally. If they make up the bulk of your day, you could run into trouble."

Here's how to keep casual drinking under control:

Set healthy drinking limits

"There are protective strategies people can use when drinking," said Shu-Ping Chen, a researcher in the Faculty of Rehabilitation Medicine who studies substance misuse.

Eat before or while drinking and sip slowly, rather than chugging it down, she suggested.

Ponting recommends following the low-risk drinking guidelines developed by the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse. The guidelines suggest a maximum of 10 drinks a week for women, with no more than two drinks a day most days, and 15 drinks a week for men, with no more than three drinks a day most days.

Beware of pouring without a measure and of barware that varies in size.

"One serving of wine is five ounces, so if you have an oversized wine glass, check into what five ounces looks like. This allows you to better track alcohol consumption," said Ponting.

Pace yourself, she added. "People should have no more than one drink per hour, to allow the body to metabolize it, and make every other drink non-alcoholic."

It also helps to stop drinking at a predetermined time, Chen said.

If you find yourself reaching for a favourite type of liquor, try not to have it in the house all the time or save it for a special occasion.

Stay safe—don't mix different types of alcohol or combine it with marijuana use.

Plan to have non-[drinking](#) days to avoid developing a habit.

Find other ways to relax

"Keep your life balanced by managing daily productivity, self-care, leisure and routine," Chen suggested.

There are several ways to do this.

- Keep in touch with friends online.
- Try a new, creative activity, like painting or some other personal project.
- Go for a brisk walk, exercising social distancing.
- Read.
- Reorganize your home.
- Garden when the weather warms up.
- Brainstorm for other ideas. "You're going to know yourself best," Ponting said.

These activities reflect the [ACE model](#) developed by U.K. researchers for a healthy way to spend time, Ponting said. Based on three concepts—achieve, connect and enjoy—it encourages people to devote time to practical tasks like housekeeping, connecting with friends and enjoying personal time with hobbies or other leisure pursuits.

"Look at the day as a pie, dedicated one-third to each of these activities, so overall, we do more and feel more fulfilled in the different areas of our lives. This helps us look after our physical and mental well-being."

Provided by University of Alberta

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