



From Sunday Funday to Sunday Scaries: Examining Our Relationship with Alcohol

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Americans use alcohol to mark all kinds of situations. Sometimes these situations are joyful, like popping bottles of champagne to celebrate a milestone or meeting up with friends for a “Sunday Funday.” Other times, we may be using alcohol to cope with the pain of a loss or the anxiety associated with “Sunday Scaries.” If we are using alcohol as a coping mechanism, it is important to recognize that we may be making our problems worse.

Alcohol Use: The Good and the Bad

Alcohol has powerful effects on our body and mind. When we drink alcohol, our central nervous system slows down, resulting in a relaxed feeling. Alcohol also lowers our inhibitions, judgment, and memory. Because the immediate effects of alcohol feel good to most people, alcohol becomes an easy way for us to deal with difficult situations and feelings.

Unfortunately, alcohol can quickly turn against us if we rely on it to manage our emotions. We may develop a tolerance, meaning we need to drink more to obtain the same desired effects. When we stop drinking, we may experience anxiety, accelerated heart rate, shakiness, nausea, and high blood pressure. Moreover, [research](#) shows that drinking to cope with distress tends to make people feel worse in the long run. These consequences can lead us back to drinking to cope, keeping us stuck in the cycle.

Getting Unstuck from the Alcohol Cycle

Using alcohol to cope with difficult emotions is like putting a band-aid on a broken bone; we are never truly tending to the cause of the problem and therefore we can't heal properly. The good news is: The cycle is preventable, and even if we find ourselves in it, we can learn to recognize it and make changes to help ourselves out. This can be accomplished in a two-step process:

Step 1: Building awareness

It can be very difficult to find solutions when we do not understand the problem. To examine our relationship with alcohol, we can monitor when and why we drink. Some options include marking the days you drink on a calendar, journaling, making notes on your phone, and/or identifying stressors/triggers. Reflective questions may help, such as, “*When and where do I drink the most? If I am using alcohol to cope, what am I using it to cope with?*”

Step 2: Making changes

Once we identify when and why we drink, we can make changes that work for us. Some alternative coping strategies could include:

- *Identifying and labeling emotions* - If we drink to get rid of painful emotions, we may miss important information they are trying to give us. Understanding your feelings will help you move through them adaptively.
- *Recognizing that emotions are temporary* - While we think that drinking helps us to get through difficult feelings, it actually prolongs their stay. Remind yourself that emotions will come and go naturally *if we let them*.
- *Mindfulness* - When we use alcohol to cope, we distance ourselves from our emotions. Mindfulness involves being intentionally and compassionately present with our experiences. [Urge surfing](#) is a technique that can help you gain awareness and respond adaptively to difficult emotions. Try it out [here](#).
- *Taking care of our bodies* – Physical self-care helps us improve our emotional resilience. We can build our physical and emotional reserves through healthy eating, getting quality sleep, taking medications as prescribed, and consistently moving our bodies.
- *Talking it out* – We may feel guilty or embarrassed when we realize our relationship with alcohol isn’t a healthy one. If we don’t talk about it, we find ourselves “putting the band-aid on the broken bone” and we get stuck in the alcohol cycle. Instead, try talking about it with someone you trust, whether that be a friend, family member, community group, or therapist.

If you are interested in exploring your relationship with alcohol, the Centers for Disease and Control Prevention offers an [online screen](#) to help you evaluate your alcohol use. If you want to make changes, they also offer a personalized change plan that you can save or print.

Talk to someone who can help! PPA’s Psychologist Locator at <https://www.papsy.org/locator> can help you find a licensed psychologist near you. For information on other mental health topics, go to <https://www.papsy.org>, then “Resources,” then “Public Resources”. Please note that these articles are intended for informational purposes only, not as a substitute for professional diagnosis or treatment.