

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

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In American culture, drinking alcohol tends to be ever present across situations. Sometimes these situations are joyful, like popping bottles of champagne to celebrate or meeting up with our friends or family for a “Sunday Funday.” Other times, we may be using alcohol to cope, such as drowning our sorrows following a loss or trying to bring down 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 has powerful effects on our body and mind. When we drink alcohol, our central nervous system depresses, or slows down, resulting in us feeling relaxed. It also lowers our inhibitions, judgment, and memory. Because of the immediate effects of alcohol, it becomes an easy way for us to deal with something we may not know how to—or want to—handle.

While the short-term benefits of drinking may appear desirable, the cycle can quickly turn into a vicious one if we are relying on alcohol to manage our emotions. We may develop a tolerance, meaning we need to drink more to obtain the same desired effects because our bodies and minds grow used to the alcohol. When we stop drinking, our bodies and minds respond to no longer having alcohol in a number of ways including anxiety/nervousness, accelerated heart rate, shakiness, nausea, and high blood pressure. Moreover, research shows that drinking to cope with distress tends to worsen negative emotional states between periods of alcohol consumption in the long-run (Armeli, Sullivan, and Tennen, 2015). These consequences can lead us back to drinking to cope, keeping us stuck in the cycle.

Using alcohol to cope with difficult emotions is metaphorically putting a band-aid on a broken bone; we are never truly tending to the emotions to help ourselves heal. The good news is: The cycle is preventable, and even if we find ourselves in it, we could work to recognize it and make changes to help ourselves out. This can be accomplished in a two-step process:

- 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?”*

2.) **Making changes:** Once we identify our relationship with alcohol, then we are able to make changes that work for us. The more we turn to alcohol to cope with discomfort, the less opportunity we are giving ourselves to find other ways that may help. Some alternative coping strategies could include:

- *Identifying and labeling emotions* - Emotions are often trying to tell us something. If we drink to get rid of these emotions, we may miss what they are trying to say. Being able to increase your understanding of what emotion is coming up for you will help you to move through your emotions adaptively.
- *Recognize that emotions are temporary* - While we think that drinking helps us to get through difficult feelings, it actually prolongs their stay. Recognizing that emotions will come and go naturally *if we let them* can make a difference in our experience.
- *Mindfulness* - When we use alcohol to cope, we are working to distance ourselves from our emotions. Mindfulness involves being intentionally and compassionately present with our experiences. [Urge surfing](#) is a mindfulness technique that could help you gain awareness and respond adaptively to behaviors you would like to change. You can learn about urge surfing by clicking the link attached or try it using [this guided practice](#).
- *Decrease emotional vulnerability* - Self-care efforts can be considered a proactive coping strategy, in that they help be prepared to respond to distress. Some ways we build our reserves is through healthy eating, getting quality sleep, taking medications as prescribed, and consistently moving our bodies.
- *Talk it out* - It is not uncommon to feel shameful, guilty, or embarrassed when we realize our relationship with alcohol may not be healthy. These emotions can lead us right back to the cycle where we put the band-aid back on our broken bone and avoid talking about it. Instead, try doing the exact opposite of what your mind is telling you and talk 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 (CDC) offers an [online screen](#) that helps you check-in on your alcohol use. If you are interested in making changes, they also offer a personalized change plan that you can save or print.

If you or someone you know may be interested in getting connected with a qualified psychologist in your area, please check out our [Psychologist Locator](#).

References

Armeli, S.; Sullivan, T.P.; and Tennen, H. (2015). Drinking to cope motivation as a prospective predictor of negative affect. *Journal of Studies on Alcohol and Drugs* 76(4):578–584, 2015. PMID: 26098033

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