



THE RISKS OF USING ALCOHOL TO RELIEVE ANXIETY

By Sheryl Ankrom, MS, LCPC | [VeryWellMind.com](https://www.verywellmind.com)

Many adults use alcohol responsibly. For some people, this might mean having the occasional nightcap to unwind after a long day or celebratory drinks at a gathering. In these situations, partaking in alcohol is considered socially acceptable – even customary.

However, even limited alcohol use can present problems for some people. In some cases, people who have certain mental health conditions, such as anxiety or panic disorder, might develop an unhealthy relationship with alcohol.

Sometimes, people turn to alcohol or other substances to help them cope with symptoms of mental illness. People with anxiety disorders, including panic

disorder and agoraphobia, sometimes use alcohol to cope with feelings of fear and anxiety.

A review of published studies found that anxiety disorders and alcohol use disorders often occur together. There are several proposed explanations for the link, including genetics, a person's environment, and the brain mechanisms related to addiction and anxiety symptoms. Given the possible connection, it's not surprising that additional research has shown that treating one condition requires adequately addressing the others.

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YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

Q: What is binge drinking?

A: According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), binge drinking can be defined as consuming an excessive amount of alcohol. This looks like drinking four or more drinks for women, or five or more drinks for men, in the span of two hours.

According to the Alcohol Addiction Center, if you partake in binge drinking five or more times a month, you may have a substance use disorder. Binge-drinking patterns can intensify over time, and your drinking may begin to negatively affect your life.

Alcohol depresses the central nervous system. When someone first has a drink of alcohol, it often has a sedative effect. It can produce a sense of euphoria and decrease a person's inhibition. Binge drinking is often considered "normal" because it is usually done in social settings or is considered a way to celebrate the end of a long week.

However, binge drinking can lead to a variety of problems. These include low self-esteem, anxiety and depression, alcohol poisoning, a struggle in balancing your priorities, and liver damage.

Remember that you are not alone. If you think you might have a drinking problem, reach out to a friend or loved one. Lean on your support system and open up the conversation about what you're struggling with.

If you are worried that your alcohol consumption is getting out of hand, call The Village EAP at 1-800-627-8220. Chemical dependency evaluations are available as part of your EAP benefit, and counselors are available to provide support to you and your family.

SIDE EFFECTS OF ALCOHOL MISUSE

Even if someone starts drinking alcohol as a way to cope with anxiety, it can quickly have the opposite effect. For one, drinking alcohol more frequently or having larger amounts can cause hangovers.

The symptoms of a hangover, such as nausea and vomiting, dizziness, dehydration, and low blood sugar, can make it hard to function. If someone is sick because of a hangover, they might not be able to attend to their responsibilities at home, school, or work – which can, in turn, fuel their anxiety.

Heavy or regular alcohol misuse also often leads to withdrawal. The symptoms of alcohol withdrawal and anxiety disorders can be similar, including agitation, anxiety, elevated blood pressure and heart rate, increased body temperature, nausea, panic attacks, and vomiting.

If a person experiences alcohol withdrawal symptoms, it can create a cycle of heightened anxiety and increased alcohol misuse.

SIGNS OF ALCOHOL MISUSE

Whether you have a mental health condition like anxiety or not, there are certain behaviors that can signal that your relationship with alcohol could be cause for concern.

You might recognize these behaviors in yourself or someone in your life may have made you aware of them. Signs can include:

- You drink alcohol frequently or excessively. According to the ADAA, this would be drinking alcohol four or more times per week. It can also mean that you have five or more drinks in one day.
- You feel that you need to consume alcohol and are unable to stop. You might feel that you need to have a drink to function in your day-to-day life.

This might take the form of feeling that you need a drink before you can wake up and start your day.

- You might feel the need to have more drinks throughout the day to keep yourself going.

HOW MUCH ALCOHOL IS TOO MUCH?

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) offers specific definitions for “heavy drinking.” The CDC considers one standard drink to be the equivalent of:

- One 12-ounce bottle of beer (5% alcohol)
- OR one 5-ounce glass of wine (12% alcohol)
- OR one 8-ounce bottle of malt liquor (7% alcohol)
- OR 1.5 ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits or liquor (40% alcohol)

The amounts listed by the CDC that are considered “heavy drinking” are different for men and women:

- For women, heavy drinking is considered 8 or more drinks per week.
- For men, heavy drinking is considered 15 or more drinks per week.

Some researchers have theorized that people with certain mental health conditions (including panic disorder) might have a lower threshold for alcohol tolerance.

- You might feel that you need to continue to drink to prevent symptoms of withdrawal.
- You feel guilt, shame, remorse, or other intense emotions about your drinking. Having these feelings about your relationship to alcohol without having the support you need to confront them can make it more difficult to cope. You might find that the intense shame you experience actually drives you to drink more as you try to escape your uncomfortable feelings.

Another sign to consider is external rather than internal: when the people in your life express concern about your relationship to alcohol. Your partner, parents, children, friends, employer, coworkers, doctor, or therapist might confront you about your drinking habits or your behavior when you drink.

When they talk to you about your drinking behavior, your loved ones might:

- Ask you to stop drinking or to drink less
- Ask (or tell) you to get help or support
- Express worry and concern, anger, frustration, sadness, grief, fear, or a combination of many emotions

- Give you clear consequences (such as losing your job or being kept from seeing your kids) should you refuse to stop drinking or seek treatment

TREATMENT FOR ALCOHOL USE AND ANXIETY DISORDERS

If you are using alcohol as a self-medicating measure, you might feel that it “works” to help you cope with your symptoms. While you might feel that it works in the short-term, it’s more likely to cause you problems in the long run. If you have an anxiety disorder, alcohol misuse and withdrawal can actually make your symptoms worse.

If you have anxiety and are using alcohol to cope, it’s important that you seek support from your doctor or mental health professional. It’s never too late (or too soon) to reach out for help if you are trying to cope with a mental health condition or substance use disorder.

There are many effective treatments for anxiety and alcohol use disorders, including ongoing individual therapy, group therapy, prescribed medications, or a combination of these methods.

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