
Alice,

I get stressed out with everyday life and find drinking a great stress release, but I am finding that I drink more and more every week and my stress levels never really decrease. Does that signify a problem? Any suggestions?

Thanks!

Answer

Dear Reader,

Determining if a person has "a problem" with alcohol can't be diagnosed virtually, however the information here can be a guide to thinking about alcohol use and whether it's a problem in your life. By noticing that drinking isn't relieving your stress, you're already demonstrating a self-awareness that can help you navigate a healthy relationship with alcohol.

You say that you drink to relieve stress, but that drinking, even more and more each week, doesn't alleviate your stress. Therein lies one potential problem. Some people who use alcohol in the way you describe become dependent on alcohol, some don't. Even if your relationship with alcohol is not one of dependency, it seems drinking alcohol may be taking the place of more effective stress management techniques that could help you feel better. Life can be stressful; it's useful for everybody to learn healthy and effective ways of coping with that stress.

There are many ways to cope stress; working with a therapist is one way that many people learn ways to deal with their stress, anxiety, and related issues. While all forms of therapy aimed at self-awareness and mastery of one's thoughts and feelings are useful, cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), has been shown to be especially effective for learning how to deal with stress and for changing unwanted behaviors, such as drinking. CBT aids the individual in learning new ways to think about and cope with stressful situations and feelings.

Yoga and other forms of exercise may help decrease physical stress in the body, leaving you simultaneously energized and more relaxed. Some people recommend acupuncture to reduce stress and depression, and conveniently, acupuncture is also known to relieve cravings for alcohol and alleviate some of the symptoms of withdrawal. Check out the related Q&As for a few additional stress management ideas.
This leads to the next part of your question, how to determine what level of drinking signifies having a problem with alcohol. Alcoholism is usually marked by a pre-occupation with alcohol and impaired control over alcohol intake. It's possible to suffer from a condition less severe than alcoholism called "alcohol abuse," which refers to drinking that causes health or social problems, but without the physical dependency on alcohol or loss of control over its use.

There are a number of clues that might signify having a drinking problem. Some of these include drinking alone, hiding your drinking from others, having 'black out' or memory loss, needing more drinks to feel the alcohol, feeling irritable if you can't drink, and a number of other indicators. The Mayo Clinic has list of questions you can ask yourself, which may help determine whether you have a drinking problem or should seek help.

It's a great idea to find methods that help you feel more on top of your stress, and to determine what kind of relationship with alcohol is healthy for you. Hopefully the qualities of self-awareness, inquiry, and intelligence with which you asked your question will help guide you to answers about healthy behaviors towards stress and alcohol.

Cheers,
Alice!

Category: Alcohol & Other Drugs
Alcohol

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Resources
Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside)  
Stressbusters Links to Success (Morningside)  
Stressbust Yourself Toolkit  
Mental Health Service (CUMC)  
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