How do I drink in moderation? [1]

Dear Alice,

How do I drink moderately in social situations?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Limiting your alcohol intake may require a bit of personal reflection and social navigation, especially in situations where it feels like everyone around you is asking for one more round. However, if you choose to drink, moderate or lower-risk drinking is an approach to consuming alcohol which may minimize negative side effects and make you feel better about the experience. This is defined by the Dietary Guidelines for Americans [2] as up to one drink per day for women and up to two drinks per day for men. Based on your question, it may be helpful to explore why you may want to practice moderation in a social setting. It’s best to first take some time to explore the reason(s) you may be concerned about their consumption. Some questions to consider include:

- Are you stressed and looking to alcohol for relief?
- Do you feel as if you have trouble stopping drinking once you start?
- Does alcohol addiction run in your family?

If any of these ring true for you, it may be worth exploring your relationship with alcohol further with a mental health professional or health care provider. However, if social pressure is indeed your primary concern, it may be helpful to practice how to casually, yet firmly, say no when turning down offers of alcohol in social situations so that you feel more capable and confident in your choice to use alcohol moderately. But first, understanding the statistics behind drinking behaviors may help you reframe the pressure you feel to drink in social settings.

Although hard to believe, it’s likely that your peers often drink moderately, if they drink at all. In fact, it’s a common misconception that people think others are drinking more than they actually are and there’s research to back that up. Among college students, according to the Spring 2019 National College Health Association’s American College Health Assessment [3], undergraduate and graduate students at almost 100 different colleges and universities believed that 93 percent
of their peers used alcohol in the past 30 days. The study found that in reality, just over 58 percent of students reporting using alcohol in the past 30 days — that’s quite a difference! More shocking perhaps is that one in four students reported never having an alcoholic beverage, while it was perceived by students that more than 95 percent of their peers had tried alcohol at least once. Additional data from the 2018 National Survey on Drug Use and Health [4] found that over 55 percent of all adults aged 18 and over in the United States (not just college students) report drinking alcohol in the past 30 days. Of those that are drinking, more than 70 percent are drinking four or fewer drinks during a given occasion. All this to say, Reader, the knowledge that others are probably consuming alcohol in a low-risk manner (or not at all) might make it easier to do so yourself.

In addition to strategies about limiting and pacing your alcohol consumption (found in related Q&As Hangover helper and tips for healthy drinking [5] and How can I be a responsible guest while drinking? [6]), a great skill to develop is how to confidently decline offers of more alcohol without feeling uncomfortable. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism [7] (NIAAA) offers suggestions for how to prepare yourself in advance to say no when you’re ready to stop or slow down your drinking:

- **You don’t have to give an explanation** when you say, “No, thanks.” Being polite yet clear in your “no” will keep the tone light while showing you’re serious about your answer. Hesitating or searching for an excuse might just give someone else an opportunity to try to persuade you. You don’t owe anyone an explanation. If, when, and how much you drink is completely up to you.
- **Repeat your clear and simple refusal** if anyone keeps trying to convince you. Hopefully, they will get the message that this is not up for discussion. If not, you might consider if these are the people who will help you reach your goals.
- **Come up with a little script for yourself** so you’ll know exactly what to say in the moment. Practicing in advance how you will say no in a friendly but resolute way may help you feel more at ease in the moment.

Although there are general guidelines about alcohol quantity consumption to help reduce risk, specific recommendations can vary from person to person. For more details on factors that shape how much alcohol can be tolerated by an individual and how alcohol affects the body, you can visit the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) webpage FAQs on Alcohol [8]. The NIAAA’s Rethinking Drinking website [9] may also help you think more critically about how you use alcohol. If you try these strategies and are still concerned about your drinking behavior, it might be best to speak to someone about it such as a health care provider, a mental health professional, or substance abuse counselor.

Preparing in advance to keep your drinking to a moderate level in social situations — as you are clearly doing — is a great first step in actually making it happen! Cheers to that!

Alice!
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