
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,

Reaching out about patterns you've observed in your own alcohol use can be really difficult, so kudos to you for submitting this question! Determining if a person has an alcohol use problem can't be diagnosed virtually, but there is info you can consider to help you reflect on your own relationship with alcohol. By noticing that drinking isn't relieving your stress, you're already demonstrating self-awareness that can help you navigate a healthy relationship with alcohol. Managing your stress level through other means, as well as potentially seeking help from a professional for your alcohol use habits, can help you maintain healthy behaviors moving forward.

It may be helpful to reflect on your drinking and how it's changed over time. In what ways have your stress levels affected your life and your ability to function daily? Have you noticed how alcohol affects your daily life and relationships? Reflecting on this may help you better understand how stress and alcohol play a role in your life and whether or not your alcohol use is problematic. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism [2] defines an alcohol use disorder as comprising compulsive or lack of control over alcohol intake and feeling negative emotions when not under the influence of alcohol. It's estimated that 16 million adults in the United States have disorders that classify under these guidelines. Alcohol use disorders range in severity and encompass a variety of symptoms, including feeling unable to limit alcohol intake, use of alcohol in unsafe situations, feeling a craving or urge to drink, and failing to meet social, work, or school expectations due to drinking. To help you reflect on your own drinking, you may find it helpful to think about if in the last year, you have:

- Had times when you ended up drinking more, or longer than you intended.
• More than once wanted to cut down or stop drinking, or tried to, but couldn’t.
• Spent a lot of time drinking.
• Spent a lot of time being sick or getting over the aftereffects.
• Experienced cravings (a strong need or urge to drink).
• Found that drinking — or being sick from drinking — often interfered with taking care of your home or family, caused job troubles, problems with school.
• Continued to drink even though it was causing trouble with your family or friends.
• Given up or cut back on activities that were valuable or interesting to you, or gave you pleasure, in order to drink.
• More than once gotten into situations while or after drinking that increased your chances of getting hurt (such as driving, swimming, using machinery, walking in a dangerous area, or having unsafe sex).
• Continued to drink even though it was making you feel depressed or anxious or adding to another health problem.
• Continued to drink after having had a memory blackout.
• Had to drink much more than you once did to get the effect you want or found that your usual number of drinks had much less effect than before.
• Found that when the effects of alcohol were wearing off, you had withdrawal symptoms, such as trouble sleeping, shakiness, irritability, anxiety, depression, restlessness, nausea, or sweating, or sensed things that were not there.

List is taken from the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism.

Reader, many people find challenges in managing stress and what strategies work for some may not work for others — it’s all about trying some out and figuring out what works best for you. It may be helpful to try seeking other ways of managing stress. Yoga [3] and other forms of physical activity may help decrease physical stress in the body, leaving you simultaneously energized and more relaxed. Some experts recommend acupuncture [4] to reduce stress and anxiety, and interestingly, some studies have found that acupuncture may reduce cravings for alcohol and alleviate some of the symptoms of withdrawal. Other stress management techniques that you may try can include scheduling some time to take breaks, listening to music, reading, creating art, and making the time to hang out with friends and family members. You also may find that seeking care from a mental health professional trained in cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) is helpful for building coping skills. You may also find it helpful to read more about Stress & Anxiety [5] in the Go Ask Alice! Emotional Health [6] category to learn more about alternative methods to manage stress.

If you’re concerned about your current relationship with alcohol, reaching out to help from a health care provider or mental health professional may be wise. They can help you decide between a wide variety of treatment plans to find the one that will work best. You may find that discussing your concerns with a trusted friend or family member before reaching out to a professional makes you more confident in seeking 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.

Good luck!

Alice!

Category:
Alcohol & Other Drugs [7]
Alcohol [8]
Emotional Health [9]
Stress & Anxiety [10]

Related questions

Can caffeine make social anxiety worse? [12]
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Resources

Columbia Health BASICS program (Morningside) [14]
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Counseling and Psychological Services (CPS) (Morningside) [16]
Student Health Service BASICS program (CUIMC) [17]
Addiction Information & Management Strategies (AIMS) (CUIMC) [18]
Medical Services (CUIMC) [19]
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[8] https://goaskalice.columbia.edu/category/alcohol