



## KNOW WHERE YOU SIT WITH ALCOHOL OR SUBSTANCE USE....

### HOW MUCH IS TOO MUCH?

We all need to unwind at the end of the day. But if you've noticed that your go-to way to relax is always reaching for a beer, a glass of wine, or another substance, it might be time to consider some alternatives. Using alcohol or other drugs as your only way to relax might mean you're relying on them to self-soothe, which isn't the healthiest approach.

Substances can temporarily relieve anxiety and serve as a distraction, but they can also lead to a cycle of dependence or addiction. Regular use might help you avoid difficult emotions or challenges for a while, but relying solely on substances for coping can increase the risk of addiction.

Even casual drinking or use can have a boomerang effect on your anxiety and interfere with your sleep cycle, making it harder to get the restful sleep you need. Poor sleep can fuel anxiety, creating a vicious cycle if you're using substances to calm down.

You don't have to give up drinking entirely, but it's helpful to have a variety of ways to feel calm and joyful. Try mixing things up a little:

### HANGING OUT WITH A FRIEND CAN ABSOLUTELY CHANGE HOW YOU FEEL

Connect with people who make you feel good. Being around friends who make you smile releases feel-good hormones like serotonin and oxytocin, which can help curb the urge to drink (King et al., 2020). Time with friends can also help you live longer. A long walk with a friend or a phone chat can help you live longer (Perissinotto et al., 2021).

### GET PHYSICAL, IT'S BOUND TO MAKE YOU FEEL GOOD

A bike ride, a walk, or a high-intensity exercise class can alleviate stress and release endorphins, which trigger positive feelings.

### EXPERIMENT WITH NON-ALCOHOLIC DRINKS

There are plenty of tasty non-alcoholic drinks on the shelves. Try mixing up a virgin version of your favourite cocktail or exploring the growing range of non-alcoholic beers, but only if you feel comfortable doing this; not everybody does.

### DANCE (EVEN IF BY YOURSELF)

There's something fabulous about putting on your favourite music and dancing around the place all by yourself. It turns out music releases dopamine, the same feel-good chemical that floods the brain when we drink alcohol (Ferreri et al., 2019).

## LEARN TO MEDITATE — YOU REALLY CAN. MEDITATION CAN EVENTUALLY HELP YOU RELAX AS MUCH AS A DRINK CAN

Meditation may help you relax as much as a drink or other substances can, eventually. First, you will need to be comfortable and confident in your meditation practice. Remember, it takes time to develop a taste for substances, so give medication or mindfulness the same time. Substances can chill us out by drowning out the noise and stress. Meditation, on the other hand, helps us quiet the brain and actually relieve stress (rather than temporarily hiding it). Meditation or mindfulness APPS can help you get started, but don't get caught scrolling or watching the news afterwards; that will just fire up your brain again.

## TACKLE THE OVERWHELMING

Perhaps not everyone's idea of a good time, but making a commitment to projects you've long neglected can help distract you from the urge to drink; try making a commitment, as hard as it is to do. No one wants to tidy drawers, but when you actually do it, it can bring immense achievement or mastery over your environment.

Don't be hard on yourself if your alternate ways to feel a sense of calm and joy take time to feel familiar and comfortable. You may be surprised at how much better you sleep, how less anxious you are, and how much more energy you have. Find your virtuous cycle.

*If, despite your best efforts, you are having trouble creating the change you think you need, reach out to your GP, who can help and recommend treatment if you need it. Consider doing an anonymous online assessment for [alcohol use](#) or [substance use](#) and discuss the results with your GP or therapist.*

