

# Alcohol & Stress - What's the Connection?



Coping with stressful or traumatic events is a challenge for everyone. Some may even develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), an anxiety disorder brought on by exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal. Chronic stress and PTSD can trigger or worsen alcohol use problems. The following information is provided to demonstrate why it is important not to use alcohol in response to a stressful situation and how to avoid using alcohol when stressed.

Research indicates that stressful events may profoundly influence the use of alcohol. People may drink as a means of coping with certain stressful situation, such as:

- Financial problems
- Job stress
- Marital problems

## RISK FACTORS

It is important to be aware that using alcohol in reaction to a stressful event or feelings may increase the risk of alcohol misuse. There are several **risk factors** for misuse of alcohol in reaction to stress:

- Using alcohol to “deal” with stress
- Experiencing the stressful event or feeling as severe, chronic, intense, or unavoidable
- Lacking social support or other resources for coping with a stressful event or feeling
- Having a family history of problem drinking
- Believing that alcohol will help to reduce stress
- Having unhealthy or other problematic drinking behavior preceding the stressful event or feeling
- Feeling helpless or having no control over the stressful event or feeling
- Trying to avoid or “numb” feelings in reaction to the stressful event



## HOW TO AVOID MISUSING ALCOHOL WHEN STRESSED

- Get screened and/or evaluated for an alcohol problem, either at the NCADA or a local substance treatment provider
- Learn what constitutes at-risk levels of drinking:
  - For a man: Greater than 2 drinks/day and 14 drinks/week, on average
  - For a woman: Greater than 1 drink/day and 7 drinks/week, on average
- Incorporate alternative ways of coping with stress, other than consuming alcohol:
  - Take a bath, walk, or a nap; call a friend; listen to relaxing music; write in a journal

## SPECIAL CONCERNS FOR PEOPLE WITH SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS

- For those in recovery, personally threatening, severe, & chronic life stressors may lead to alcohol relapse
- A person with a substance use disorder may resume alcohol use after a lengthy abstinence period to try to lessen the stressful feelings
- Those most vulnerable to relapse tend to be people with low levels of coping skills, self-efficacy, and social support

For help or information, call NCADA  
at 314.962.3456 or visit [ncada-stl.org](http://ncada-stl.org)

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