

Cutting down

Alcohol and your health



Te Whatu Ora
Health New Zealand

The Alcohol and Your Health booklets

This booklet is one of the six booklets in the Alcohol and Your Health series.

Each of the booklets is written for a particular group. Four are for the drinker experiencing problems, one is for those close to the drinker, and one is for practitioners working in a brief intervention setting.

The series Alcohol and Your Health (2013) is by Ian MacEwan and is the fifth edition of the series originally called Your Drinking and Your Health written by Ian MacEwan and Greg Ariel, and based on concepts developed by the Scottish DRAMS project.

The Alcohol and Your Health series includes:

Is your drinking okay?

Cutting down

Stopping drinking

Maintaining the change

Concerned about someone's drinking?

Helping with problem drinking

Introduction

This booklet is for people who have decided to cut down their drinking and contains some practical tools to help achieve this goal.

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Part 1

Do you enjoy a drink?

There is no reason why you shouldn't. Alcohol gives pleasure. If it is taken in moderation and at the right time and place, alcohol can be enjoyed with a low level of risk.

This booklet is for people who wish to cut down their drinking while still enjoying the pleasure it gives.

One thing is certain – to enjoy drinking, you must drink in a way that is not harmful to you or anyone else.

This is not for people who are dependent on alcohol

If you need alcohol to live, to get by or to avoid the shakes, sweating, having fits, seeing things that aren't there, feeling anxious or feeling depressed, you need to stop drinking. If you think you might be an alcoholic, this booklet is not for you. Also it is not for you if you go through withdrawal when you stop drinking.

Withdrawal symptoms are caused by your body having become accustomed to the presence of alcohol to function normally. When alcohol is removed, the body 'complains' about it in the form of withdrawal symptoms. These are unpleasant. Often the only way the sufferer can think of to get rid of them, or avoid them happening in the first place, is to have more to drink.

This creates a cycle of drinking to avoid withdrawal symptoms, which leads to further drinking and so on. This cycle is hard to break without assistance. If you have experienced withdrawal symptoms, you should seek help by contacting your local alcohol and drug treatment service or by going to your doctor.

Try another booklet in this series called *Stopping drinking*.

So who is this for?

It is for you if you are drinking too much, or your drinking is causing problems (if you are not drinking to avoid or get rid of withdrawal symptoms).

There may be problems at work, with your finances, with the police, with your health or with your family.

If you are not sure whether you need to cut down, ask for a copy of another booklet called *Is your drinking okay?*

You hear heavy drinkers say, *"I'm not an alcoholic. I don't have a drink problem."* You may not be an alcoholic in the sense of being dependent on alcohol, but if you recognise any of the types of harm described above as applying to you, you have a problem with drinking. This means that there are some problems, or a problem, which are related in some way to drinking alcohol.

This booklet has been written to help you do something about it.

There is no magical solution to problem drinking and positive results cannot be guaranteed simply from reading this booklet. The determination and the effort have to come from you. The booklet is to help you to help yourself.

Solving a drinking problem is more than a question of will-power. If you use certain methods to bring your drinking back under control, you will succeed. This booklet will teach you the best method for cutting down your drinking.

You may have tried to cut down in the past and failed. This may have been because you lacked a system for cutting down. This booklet will show you how to reduce your drinking systematically.

This is not a booklet that is to be read only. This is a 'doing' booklet that sets you exercises to complete and skills to practise and that requires you to participate.

How do I use this booklet?

This is a 'doing' booklet and there are lots of places where you are asked to fill in spaces with information that applies to you. Although this information may not be embarrassing, you might not want anybody else to read it.

Keep the booklet in a place where others will not find it.

Whether or not you keep your entries private, it is essential that you fill in the tables provided in the booklet if you want to benefit from them.

Other parts of the booklet provide you with facts about alcohol and drinking and there are questions to see how many of these facts you know. Continue once you know the correct answers.

Even where there are no questions, don't read on until you understand what you have just read.

Don't read the booklet once then put it aside. Use it for months, or even longer. Go through it slowly, and make sure you have filled in the tables and practised all the exercises.

On page 53 there is a 'check chart', which you should fill in as you successfully complete each part. After finishing the booklet, keep it in a handy place so you can remind yourself of what it contains.

To summarise, this booklet is for you if:

- you are not dependent on alcohol
- you have a problem with your drinking
- you are drinking too much
- you have to do something about your drinking
- it wouldn't be better to stop drinking completely
- you want to enjoy drinking in a way that minimises the harm.

Part 2

Why should you cut down?

If you drink regularly, you may have health problems including:

- being overweight
- poor appetite
- stomach upsets and ulcers
- liver trouble
- headaches, hangovers, poor memory, poor concentration
- lacking energy, general weakness or tiredness, trembling fingers or limbs.

If you have become a regular drinker you may have noticed that you have to drink more alcohol than you used to do to get the same effect. This is true of all drugs and it can lead to your drinking more and more, which will affect your general health.

Drinking as a relief from financial, personal or family problems? Drinking to help you feel less anxious? Alcohol has a poor record of solving problems. Alcohol increases anxiety.

Anxiety, depression, loneliness, relationship breakdowns, loss of friends and loss of employment are common experiences from heavy drinking.

A common story told by people who drink too much is that alcohol slowly, maybe over years, becomes more and more important in their lives. What starts as an enjoyable social activity becomes a relationship that begins to edge out, to undermine, to break up relationships with parents, family, partner, friends and workmates, and involvement in sports, hobbies and interests. Eventually, many find that the most important relationship has become the one with alcohol. It has become important to ensure it's always available, and the thought of not having it is like a relationship break-up. Becoming aware of these lost or damaged relationships, which used to be so important, is the beginning of cutting down and controlling their drinking.

Another common story is the wearing down of the body, the mind, the hopes and the happiness from long-term heavy drinking. People talk of becoming sick and tired and depressed and feeling that they have lost their sense of purpose. Becoming sick and tired of being sick and tired is the beginning of cutting down and controlling their drinking.

Drinkers become afraid of what might happen if they can't cut down. They try to cut down, or go without drinking for a period, but find they quickly start drinking again, and increasing the amount and frequency. This loss of personal control over drinking is a major concern.

Some worry that their sense of personal value, how they want to see themselves and to be seen by others, has been undermined or attacked, by their dependence on alcohol.

- A value like te aroha: having regard for others and those for whom you are responsible and to whom you are accountable.
- A value like te whakapono: the basis of your beliefs and the confidence that what you are doing is right.
- Or a value like ngā ture: the knowledge that your actions are morally and ethically right and that you are acting in an honourable manner. How has drinking affected these values for you?

Here are three questions to ask yourself:

1. **What are the problems?**
2. **What will happen if I don't stop drinking?**
3. **What kind of person (for example, mother, father, grandparent, husband, wife, partner, of value to others, self-respecting) do I want to be and how is drinking getting in the way of being that person?**

Your drinking and your health

Assess the effect of your drinking on your health. First, measure the amount of alcohol you drink. A simple measure of alcohol called a standard drink (SD) can help.



One SD contains 10 grams of alcohol.

One SD is the amount of alcohol in a half-pint of beer or a small glass of wine or a single shot of spirits.

A bottle of wine holds approximately 7.5 SDs, so think about how many glasses you get out of a bottle. All alcohol must state the number of SDs in the bottle or can. It will be on the label.

Four pints of beer or lager equal eight whiskies. Just to stress the point – one half-pint (a 250ml glass) of beer equals one spirit equals one SD.

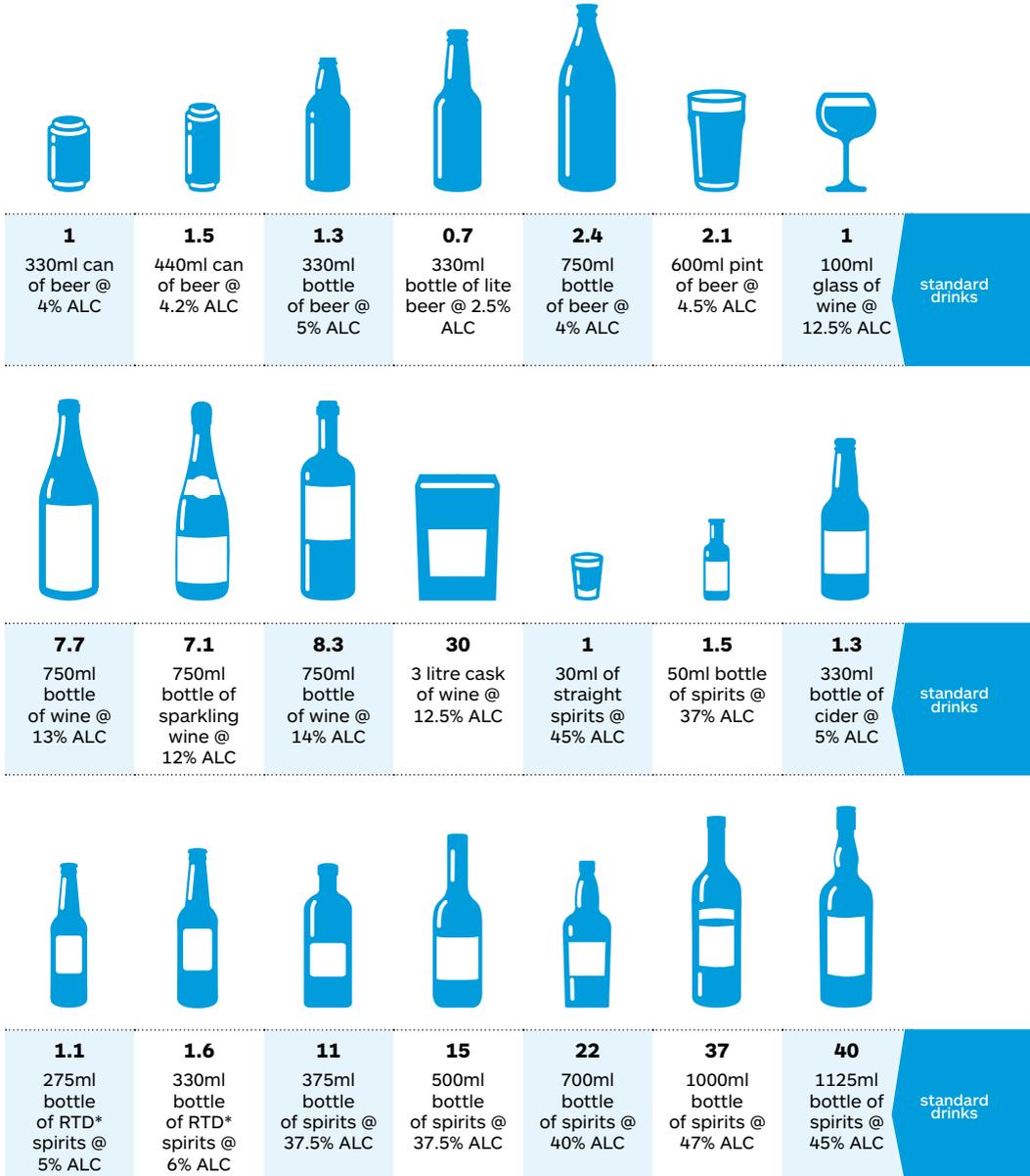
By counting the number of drinks you have, you can measure the amount of alcohol going into your body.



When you've finished drinking, that's not the end. Alcohol continues to have effects on you afterwards, whether you have a painful hangover or not.

It takes your body one hour to get rid of one SD. If you have six pints or handles (12 SDs) of beer on Sunday night, your body is still getting rid of the alcohol when you're driving to work the next morning.

How many standard drinks in different drinks?



* RTD (READY TO DRINK)
ALC refers to alcohol content by volume

Using the list of drinks on the previous page to work out SDs, complete the table below with how much you had to drink in your last typical drinking week.

How much do you drink?

Day	Type of drink	How much you had to drink	SDs	Total
Monday				
Tuesday				
Wednesday				
Thursday				
Friday				

Example

Monday	Beer 5%	4 x 330ml bottle	5.2	9.1
	Wine 12%	half a bottle	3.9	

Low-risk alcohol drinking advice



Reduce your long-term health risks by drinking no more than:

- 2 standard drinks *a day for women* and no more than **10** standard drinks *a week*
- 3 standard drinks *a day for men* and no more than **15** standard drinks *a week*
AND at least *two alcohol-free days* every week.

Reduce your risk of injury on a single occasion of drinking by drinking no more than:

- 4 standard drinks *for women* on any *single occasion*
- 5 standard drinks *for men* on any *single occasion*

Stop drinking if you could be pregnant, are pregnant, or are trying to get pregnant.

There is no known safe level of alcohol use at any stage of pregnancy.

When not to drink

It's advisable not to drink if you:

- are **pregnant** or planning to get pregnant
- are on **medication** that interacts with alcohol
- have a **condition** that could be **made worse by drinking alcohol**
- feel unwell, **depressed**, tired or cold, as alcohol could make these things worse
- are about to **operate machinery or a vehicle** or do anything that is risky or **requires skill**.

Part 3

How can you cut down?

Your self-monitoring diary

Before you can break a habit, you must be aware of it.

The first step in cutting down your drinking is to start what is called self-monitoring. Self-monitoring means watching yourself and keeping a diary of when, where and exactly how much you are drinking.

You have already done this for the last typical drinking week in Part 2. From today, note down each time you drink in the diary at the back of the booklet (pages 50 to 52). Fill in your entries as soon after drinking as possible; otherwise you might forget to record all of your drinking.

A day in your diary might look like the example on the next page.

Although the examples of consequences given might be considered as negative, this need not always be the case. You can put in good consequences as well.

For example, 'have a good laugh' might be a good consequence of drinking. So you can put both good and not so good things in the consequences column. Make a separate entry for each drinking session.

If you have a drink at lunchtime and go out again in the evening, you should not lump these two sessions together, but record each one separately. Keep this detailed record for two weeks.

In the next 12 weeks, keep a record of just your SDs every day on the chart on page 52.

Even after you have completed all the diary pages included in this booklet, you should still keep a record of how many SDs you have each day.

By keeping a close track of your drinking you'll be able to see if your intake is beginning to creep up again. Start recording today.

Drinking diary – first week

Day	Time	Hours spent	Place	Who with	Other activities	Money spent	SDs	Consequences (if any)
Thu	1-2pm	1	Rogans	Keith	Eating	\$17.00	2	Sleepy
	5-6pm	1	The Bull	Keith & Jerry		\$10.20	2	
	8pm-midnight	4	Club	Jerry & Mick	Darts	\$34.00	7	Hangover
Fri	1-2pm	1	Rogans	Keith	Eating	\$9.50	2	Sleepy

Risky circumstances

Think about the circumstances when you drink more than you should.

Think of the last few times when drinking caused you trouble – hangovers, accidents, lateness for work, arguments in the family, with friends, and so on – as well as the last few times when you drank without trouble.

Are there any differences between the two types of drinking occasion?

Look at the examples on pages 12 and 13, which show a record of drinking that causes trouble and drinking that is free of trouble. (These tables are made up in the same way as your drinking diary.)

Kim's troublesome drinking times

Times	Day	Time	Hours spent	Place	Who with	Other activities
1.	Friday 10th	7–10pm	3	Jenny's flat & The Bull	Jenny, Jan & Helen	None
2.	Saturday 11th	5–10pm	5	Kate's Café & Bar, Chinese Restaurant	Bill & Helen	Eating
3.	Thursday 16th	7–11pm	4	Sports Club	Alan, Jim & Helen	None
4.	Saturday 18th	7–10pm	3	Sports Club	Helen, John & Pat	None

Kim's trouble-free drinking times

Times	Day	Time	Hours spent	Place	Who with	Other activities
1.	Friday 3rd	8–11pm	3	Sports Club	Darts team	Darts
2.	Friday 17th	8pm–midnight	4	Chinese Restaurant & The Eagle Bar	Jenny & Jan	Eating
3.	Saturday 25th	9pm–midnight	3	Sports Club	Alan, Jim & Jan	Cards
4.	Sunday 26th	8–11pm	3	Kate's Café & Bar	John & Pat	None

Money spent	SDs	Consequences (if any)
\$40.00	10	Fell, cut my hand
\$25.00	7	Argument with Bill, went home early
\$26.00	7	Hangover – late for work next day
\$35.00	3	Missed bus home, argument with Les

With this example, write down the circumstances when drinking caused problems.

1.

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2.

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3.

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4.

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5.

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Now write down the circumstances when the drinking was trouble-free.

1.

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2.

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3.

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4.

.....

5.

.....

Money spent	SDs	Consequences (if any)
\$16.00	4	Had a good time
\$12.00	3	
\$15.00	3	Relaxing evening
\$14.00	4	Got a good buzz – great conversation

Circumstances common to the times when drinking caused problems

1. Drinking began at seven o'clock or earlier.
2. Helen was there at each of these times.
3. On two occasions a large amount was drunk in a short time.
4. Each time seven SDs or more were drunk.
5. Three out of four times the only activity was drinking.

Circumstances common to trouble-free drinking

1. Drinking always began at eight o'clock or later.
2. Helen was never there on these occasions.
3. Not drinking large amounts in a short time.
4. Not drinking more than four SDs of alcohol.
5. Three out of four times doing something as well as drinking.

From this exercise a set of drinking rules could be made to reduce the problems.

Risky circumstances can be of several different kinds. The following are typical:

- people you drink with – including those who drink too much
- times when you drink – including time of day and certain days of the week, like weekend days
- whether you are hungry or thirsty
- how you are feeling – whether you are anxious or under stress, frustrated, angry or depressed
- trouble with other people – this may include rows with your partner or your friends, or arguments with your boss.

There are other kinds of risky circumstances, of which some will apply to you and nobody else. Think of personal circumstances connected with your drinking.

Understand your drinking

You feel the urge to drink more in some situations than others because you have learned to link these situations with drinking. For instance, if you often have a drink on your way home from work, you'll feel a desire to drink on your way home from work in the future. If you often get drunk with certain friends, when you meet them again you'll feel the same urge to get drunk with them.

Your own drinking rules

Now do this exercise for your own drinking. Fill in the charts on pages 16 and 17 then fill in the details.

When you've finished, draw up your own set of drinking rules on page 18.

Your drinking rules will be based on your past circumstances. You might want to think about them again in about six weeks' time.



Drinking rules

1. I will never drink alcohol before eight o'clock at night.
2. I will stop drinking with Helen.
3. I will never drink over a period of more than four hours.
4. I will never drink more than four SDs in one day.
5. I will try to combine drinking with some other pleasant activity.

Troublesome drinking times

Times	Day	Time	Hours spent	Places	Who with	Other activities
1.						
2.						
3.						
4.						

Trouble-free drinking times

Times	Day	Time	Hours spent	Places	Who with	Other activities
1.						
2.						
3.						
4.						

Money spent	SDs	Consequences (if any)

What do my drinking sessions that cause trouble have in common?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Money spent	SDs	Consequences (if any)

What do my trouble-free drinking sessions have in common?

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Avoid those situations where you drink heavily or get into trouble. Keep your drinking to those situations where you drink moderately and without trouble. Your drinking rules help you do this.

My drinking rules

1.
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2.
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3.
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4.
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5.
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Deciding your maximum

In your drinking rules you may have written down a rule about the maximum amount you will drink in any one session. In the example given on pages 12-13 there was no trouble when drinking was kept to four SDs or fewer. Therefore, one of the rules was never to drink more than this amount (as well as trying to keep well below this amount). Have you got a similar maximum number of SDs?

If you haven't got a maximum, set one now.

Your maximum must be less than you are drinking now. Not just one or two SDs but a real drop in intake.

Set a realistic figure. There is no point in setting your maximum so low that it's unlikely that you'll stick to it.

The maximum amount you choose **should not be above five SDs per occasion for men and four SDs for women**. And even that should be spaced over a period of time – two to three hours or more. You will normally be spending less time drinking than this. Therefore, your maximum should be lower than these amounts.

A maximum doesn't mean you should drink that amount on every occasion. Most days you should drink less than your maximum and on a few days per week not drink at all. The maximum is the amount you should never exceed on any one occasion.



Key points

- Your maximum number of SDs should represent a meaningful reduction in your drinking.
- It should be a realistic target.
- The maximum amount should be a per-occasion amount.
- For men, the maximum should be no more than five SDs per occasion.
- For women, the maximum should be no more than four SDs per occasion.
- At least two days should be alcohol-free.

Decide now on your per-occasion maximum limit.

My per-occasion cut-off is ____ SDs

Slowing down your drinking

Even though you have set your maximum SDs and even though you're beginning to drink in less risky situations, you may still be having difficulties. One common difficulty is slowing down the speed of your drinking. If you want to drink less and want to enjoy other people's company while drinking, drink more slowly.

This is difficult to start with, because drinking is a habit and habits are hard to break. Here's how to slow down your drinking.

1. Pace yourself

Before each drinking occasion, ask yourself:

- How much do I plan to drink?
- How long do I intend to drink?
- How long must each drink last?

For example, your answers might be:

- I plan to drink four SDs (two pints/handles, four glasses of wine) tonight.
- I'll go out at 8.30pm and come back at 10.30pm.
- One pint must last an hour or each glass of wine must last 30 minutes.

An hour for one pint! You might think you can't do this. Try the hints on the next page.

2. Try a 'spacer' instead of a 'chaser'

A 'spacer' is a non-alcoholic drink that you take between alcoholic ones; you space them out. That way you slow down your drinking. You'll be surprised how good and refreshing a spacer can be between alcoholic drinks. If you're drinking beer, try a coke. If you're drinking wine, try a lemon and lime.

3. Take smaller sips

Plan how long each drink should take; slow down the rate at which you sip your drink. Sip less often and take smaller sips.

4. Put your glass down between sips

Don't hold your drink. Put it down on a table or shelf after each sip. If it's in your hand, you'll drink more often. At home, put it out of reach so you have to get up to get the glass.

5. Occupy yourself

Don't just drink!! Do something enjoyable while drinking that will help to distract you from the glass and drink more slowly. Here are a few things you can do:

- read
- watch television or listen to music
- talk
- play games such as darts, pool, cards, PlayStation
- eat (but beware of crisps, chips and peanuts – they make you thirsty).

6. Change your drink

Favourite drinks will increase the desire to drink more. Be adventurous. Try lager instead of draught. Try low-alcohol beer. If you drink spirits, change to a different one and make it a long drink with orange, tonic or another mixer. Don't choose a new drink that is stronger than your favourite. Find out the strength of everything you try. Break the habit of always keeping to your favourite drink.

7. Drink for taste

Savour the taste of your drink. Let it rest on your tongue and enjoy the flavour. Don't swill it down.

8. Don't drink beer and spirits together

You take in alcohol much faster this way.

9. Dilute your drinks

The longer the drink, the slower the rate of alcohol intake. So top up spirits with non-alcoholic mixers, making sure you add more mixer than spirits. Add water or soda to wine. Try a shandy when you're drinking beer.

10. Match the slowest drinker

When drinking with others, match your drinking to that of the slowest drinker.

11. Round-buying

If you drink in a round-buying group, ask yourself whether you're drinking more than you would if you were not in a round.

You can tell the group that you'll buy your own drinks and explain why. If you feel unable to do that, think about whether they're the people you want to drink with.

You can buy one round (so they know you aren't mean), then go solo.

You can buy yourself a spacer when it's your turn to buy.

Ask yourself whether the group in which you drink might be a 'risky circumstance' that should be avoided. If that's the case, maybe the simplest way of avoiding rounds is to drop out of the group. You might be surprised to find that someone else in the group feels the way you do. Try talking to some of them on their own and see.

Rewarding your successes

So far we've been making rules.

You have written down your personal drinking rules. You have made a rule about your maximum drinks point. You have made a rule to keep your drinking diary up to date every day.

Cutting down your drinking is about having rules for the way you drink, and sticking to them.

This section will show you how to make it easier to stick to the rules you've made.

Reward yourself every time you stick to one of your rules.

Material rewards

These can be anything you like, but there are a few things to bear in mind when choosing a material reward:

- It should be something you can get fairly soon after your success. The sooner you get the reward, the more effective it will be in supporting your new drinking goal.
- It should be something you can easily get or afford.
- It should be something over and above the normal pleasures of life – something that's a luxury.
- It should be a genuine pleasure for you – not just something that's supposed to be a reward.

Be sensible in choosing rewards. Don't choose ones that will cause other problems for you.

Never reward yourself for cutting down drinking by having another drink.

Write down five things or activities in the space on page 23 that could serve as material rewards for you.

You can build up small rewards until they amount to something really great – perhaps something you have always wanted to own.

A simple way of doing this is to work out each week how much you have saved on drink by cutting down. (You can use the 'money spent' column in your drinking diary for this.) Put this amount away in a box, or in a special account at your bank, keeping tabs on how much has been saved. When the total has reached the amount you have decided on, you can spend it all on that special thing you want. It's rewarding to watch your savings on drink mount up.

There are two golden rules in using material rewards.

The first is that you must make an agreement with yourself beforehand about what will count as a success and what the reward for that success will be. Don't decide on a reward after you've succeeded. Write it down in advance.

The second rule is that you either succeed or fail; there are no in-betweens.

Stick rigidly to your limits and don't bend the rules.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

Mental rewards

Mental rewards come from your inner voice every time you keep to a rule.

They are an effective way of changing your behaviour and they don't cost a cent! The kinds of things you could say to yourself include:

"I kept below my maximum drinks today."

"I kept to my drinking rules and I'm in control of my drinking."

"I kept my drinking diary up to date."

"I avoided getting into that round."

"I drank that pint more slowly than I've managed before – well done."

These are examples and you'll think of more. Mental rewards can be used to celebrate the small but important successes you have during the day, as well as larger achievements, such as keeping to your weekly limit. Reward yourself immediately.

Write down, in the space below, things you could say to yourself for sticking to your rules. Concentrate on the benefits of cutting down drinking, like looking and feeling healthier, getting fitter, avoiding troubles from drinking, having more time and money to do other things, and so on.

1.
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2.
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3.
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4.
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5.
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If you fail to keep under your maximum SDs or you break rules you have made, don't give up. Learn from the experience and think how you can change things in the future.

Remind yourself of the unpleasant results of continuing to drink too much, and of what might happen to you if you don't control your drinking. Look at yourself in the mirror, and say to yourself, "**Stop it!**" Remind yourself of how well you have done and return to your limits and rules. Don't criticise yourself. This is a battle and you are going to win.

Your support person

It helps to tell others about your decision. Think carefully about who will be interested in and supportive of your cutting down. Your partner, a friend, a parent or another person who is important to you. These people will be critical in helping you to carry out your decisions about drinking. Doing it on your own is hard. Tell your support person you're going to cut down your drinking. Involve them in your thinking, planning, exercises, when things go well and even when things don't go as planned.

Select a person close to you to reward you with support and praise. Choose someone you trust and who knows all about your efforts to cut down your drinking. Sound silly? It's not. A supportive friend or partner is worth a million words in a self-help booklet.

Don't choose someone who will take the opportunity to criticise or insult you.

There are several ways an ally helps you to cut down. Make an agreement with them that they will only reward you if you keep to a rule.

The reward should be special, like cooking your favourite meal or treating you to a night out. You might agree to enjoy a certain reward together.

Apart from rewarding separate successes, your support person can help by going over your progress with you – discussing difficulties you have come across and congratulating you on your successes. It could be very helpful if your support person reads this booklet with you to understand what you're doing.

There are two ways you should not use a support person. You should not ask them to act in a policing role, by checking up on whether you have kept to a rule or not. That must be your responsibility. Never use your partner for any kind of punishment as this can harm a good relationship.

Chart your progress

There is nothing as rewarding as seeing the progress you're making. To do this, there's a chart for you to fill in below.

12-week diary

Note down your SDs each day								
Weeks	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun	Total
1								
2								
3								
4								
5								
6								
7								
8								
9								
10								
11								
12								

Record your progress on the chart because this is an effective way to see how you're cutting down. Enjoy your successes, and notice if you are sliding back into old habits.

Do it. Mark how many SDs you drink each day.

More on cutting down

Here are more ways to cut down your drinking.

Eat

Eat a substantial meal before drinking. The alcohol is absorbed more slowly and gives you a more pleasant sensation than if you drink on an empty stomach. If you eat chips and peanuts while drinking, always have a non-alcoholic spacer with them – otherwise they will make you thirsty and you'll drink more alcohol. Spacers between alcoholic drinks act like food slowing the absorption of alcohol.

Start later

If you haven't made a rule for yourself about when to drink, start drinking later than usual.

Instead of starting with the six o'clock news, start with your evening meal. If you usually have a drink after your evening meal, miss it out.

Learn to refuse a drink

You are the one who decides when, where and how much you drink. Practise a way of refusing drinks, for example, *"No thanks, I'm cutting down"* or *"Not tonight, I've got a bad stomach"* or *"Sorry, doctor's orders"*. Follow the refusal with a request for a non-alcoholic drink, eg *"No thanks, but I'd love a coffee"*. If people persist, ask yourself why they are so keen to see you drinking more.

If you find refusing drinks difficult, practise with your support person.

I need more to drink

Why? Because you're tense, anxious, depressed, shy, bored, lonely, lacking in confidence?

Alcohol is not the answer.

Look at these problems and how you can overcome them without alcohol.

Next

When you have reached week six of your drinking diary, look for common problems.

Revise your drinking rules if necessary.

Days off drinking

If you drink every day, your body and mind will miss it when you don't have a drink. If you never take a day off from alcohol, you may lack confidence that you can break the habit. Not drinking for a couple of days a week shows that you can do it and you'll enjoy it more. Enjoy doing things without alcohol. Do you think you can't talk to strangers or mix at social gatherings unless you have a drink? Do you always take a drink when meeting others? Try it out. Without alcohol. Go on.

You may have never given yourself a chance to develop other skills, sports or hobbies because your time is taken up with drinking.

Experiment! Go to that car maintenance class you are always talking about. You wanted to play a musical instrument? Buy a guitar and a teach-yourself booklet. The marathon you enjoy watching on TV? Start with a little exercise or take up a sport. Nothing makes you want to cut down more than getting fit.

There are opportunities that you may be missing. Give your body a break from alcohol for a few days each week.

Conclusion

Use these methods and you'll cut down on your drinking and bring it back under control. However, as in changing any habit, you may well slip into your old ways now and again.

If you do slip, don't give up. Say to yourself, *"I can do it."* Relapses might occur. Ask *"What can I learn from it?"* and get back to your plans.

Remind yourself of the methods you can use for cutting down. Keeping your drinking diary, sticking to your drinking rules and setting yourself a strict daily cut-off are essential to cutting down.

The other methods are optional and whether you use some or all of them depends on what's right for you. Be patient and give each method a try to see if it works for you.

Try one at a time and gradually add each method to your way of cutting down.

Methods for cutting down

Here is a list of methods for cutting down. Look at your drinking rules before ticking anything

	Yes	Maybe	No
Keep a drinking diary			
Keep to my personal drinking rules			
Keep under a daily cut-off			
Pace my drinking			
Sip more slowly			
Take smaller sips			
Occupy myself while drinking			
Change my type of drink			
Drink for taste			
Don't mix beer and spirits			
Imitate a slow drinker			
Put my glass down and out of reach between sips			
Tell my friends I'll buy my own drinks			
Buy one round then go solo			
Give myself material rewards for success			
Ask someone close to be my partner in reward			
Chart my progress on the graphs provided			
Order a spacer			
Refuse drinks during rounds			
Give up drinking with round-buying groups			

Dilute my spirits			
Eat before I drink			
Buy soft drinks between alcoholic ones			
Have at least three alcohol-free days per week			
Start drinking later			
Learn to refuse drinks			

Tick the chart

Read it each day to remind yourself of the decisions you have made. You should have ticked **Yes** for the first four items.

Part 4

Coping with difficulties

There are no easy answers to life's problems, but look at difficulties that apply to you and think of ways to make the most of your life without drinking heavily. Look over the 'Check chart' on page 53.

Why I drink the way I do

Drinking because you need to can lead to becoming dependent on alcohol.

Why do I drink?

	Seldom	Often
I drink because it helps me to relax.		
I drink because it's refreshing.		
I drink because it makes me feel good.		
I drink because of pressure from friends and workmates.		
I drink because it's polite to do so on certain occasions.		
I drink because I enjoy the taste.		
I drink because people know I drink.		

I drink in order to celebrate.		
I drink to forget my worries.		
I drink because it gives me confidence.		
I drink when I feel angry.		
I drink to be sociable.		
I drink because there's nothing else to do.		
I drink to pull myself together.		
I drink because it makes me feel at ease with people.		
If you have other reasons for drinking, write them down below.		
1.		
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		

Complete this questionnaire and consider why you're drinking.

There are different reasons for people drinking heavily, but perhaps the four most common are related to anxiety, including stress-related anxiety, boredom, lack of confidence and depression.

Alcohol is a depressant drug, dulling your nervous system, making you feel less anxious and more confident. But this is only true in the short term. When you drink a lot, you will get hangovers – which make you anxious and depressed. In the long term, heavy drinking makes you more anxious and you get caught in a vicious cycle.

On the right are common symptoms of anxiety and common hangover symptoms. See the similarities? Drink more than your maximum amount and you're likely to feel anxiety-type symptoms that are caused by alcohol – even though you're drinking to ease your anxiety. Drinking to get rid of anxiety leads to dependence.



Anxiety symptoms

- Shakiness
- Diarrhoea
- Poor concentration
- Loss of appetite
- Sweating
- Headache
- Palpitations
- Stomach upset
- Tension
- Dizziness
- Breathlessness



Hangover symptoms

- Shaking hands
- Diarrhoea
- Poor concentration
- Loss of appetite
- Sweating
- Headache
- Tremors
- Stomach upset

Reduce anxiety

Anxiety can be made worse by fear of the symptoms of the anxiety.

These symptoms are not dangerous. If you can detach yourself from them, even a little, they will go away. If you worry about them, they will stay.

Take a deep breath

You breathe quickly when you feel anxious, which makes you feel even more anxious. Shallow, quick breathing is called hyperventilation and causes anxiety-type symptoms. Try deeper, slow breathing the next time you feel anxious.



The following exercise may help you

1. Rest your fingers on the bottom of your rib cage and close your eyes.
2. Breathe in and out slowly and gently so that this part of your chest rises and falls.
3. Take one long, slow, inward breath, making sure your whole lungs are full.
4. Hold for three or four seconds.
5. Breathe out slowly and gently, and let your whole body relax as you exhale, saying “relax” to yourself as you do so.
6. Repeat this several times, and as often as you want. But do not strain yourself; do it gently.

Practise this a few times a day – it doesn't take long.

In between, try to breathe more slowly and a little more deeply.

Relax

You get tense when you're anxious. Muscle tension causes headaches and you feel tired. There are many ways of learning to relax. For some people, lying back and listening to music is enough. There are other ways to control the tension in your muscles. The idea is to know when your muscles are tense and when they are relaxed.

You can learn to tell by following these steps:

1. Tense up one group of muscles (say your leg muscles).
2. Notice what the feelings of tension are like.
3. Relax the muscles.
4. Notice the different feeling when relaxed.
5. Let these feelings and the relaxation increase.

Do this for each group of muscles.

You might work through them like this:

- right arm
- left arm
- neck
- scalp
- face
- shoulders
- back
- chest
- stomach
- right leg
- left leg.

Practise in a quiet, darkened room and leave yourself plenty of time. Fifteen minutes once or twice a day should help. If you find this difficult at first, do not give up.

Relaxation CDs help. You can find these in shops or online.

Physical exercise

Take regular exercise and you'll feel less tense and anxious. Aerobics, swimming, squash, running, walking, football, weight training, badminton and many other sports are great ways of relaxing. Start some form of exercise. Join a local walking group, exercise class or gym to help encourage and motivate you to exercise regularly.

Your friends

Loneliness can cause anxiety and unhappiness. If you're lonely or isolated, meet new people who don't drink heavily. Joining a hobby or interest group club is a good way.

Are there old friends you've drifted away from? That happens to heavy drinkers – they lose old friends because drinking becomes more important than other things. Look them up.

If your anxiety is persistent and troublesome, your doctor can refer you to someone who can give you extra help.



The following books may be of help

Self-Help for Your Nerves

by Clair Weekes, Angus and Robertson (available also on audiotape).

How to Cope with Stress

by Peter Tyrer, Sheldon.

Stress and Distress

by Margit Brew, Methuen.

Cope with boredom

Have you said to yourself, “*There's nothing else to do except drink around here?*”? If you have, think again, because it is not true. There is always something to do other than drink, even though it might need some effort to arrange it. Try brainstorming. Free your mind to come up with alternative activities to drinking, no matter how ridiculous.

These can be anything from dominoes to tap-dancing, photography to flying. The important thing is not to stop the flow of your ideas. Try out this exercise with your support person or one of your family or a friend. Fill in the chart opposite with as many possible alternatives to drinking as you can. Don't worry about whether or not you have money or opportunity to do them, just brainstorm!

Alternatives to alcohol

- | | |
|----|-----|
| 1. | 9. |
| 2. | 10. |
| 3. | 11. |
| 4. | 12. |
| 5. | 13. |
| 6. | 14. |
| 7. | 15. |
| 8. | 16. |

Think carefully about the alternatives. Which would you enjoy most?
Can you do them locally? List below those activities you intend to take up.

- | | |
|----|----|
| 1. | 5. |
| 2. | 6. |
| 3. | 7. |
| 4. | 8. |

Now make some notes on the first steps you'll take to find out about these activities.
(Contact your local library, Citizens Advice Bureau, community centre, etc).

- | | |
|----|----|
| 1. | 4. |
| 2. | 5. |
| 3. | 6. |

Develop your self-confidence

Do you drink because you lack confidence, feel shy or find it hard to stick up for yourself?

Do you find it hard to express anger, tend to bottle things up and say nothing, or say something different from what you feel?

Do you 'explode' later in response to a trivial incident, when you should have been firmer at the time? You might have difficulty in saying "No" to people about things in general, including when you're offered drinks.

Sometimes these difficulties include shyness and low self-confidence, particularly with those you're attracted to. These problems can't be dealt with properly here, although a few comments may help.

Confidence and assertiveness are skills, like driving a car or operating a machine. This means that with training and practice you can behave in a confident manner. Behaving more confidently makes you more confident.

If you lack confidence, try behaving as if you are confident. If a friend asks you to go out drinking with them, stop and think. Do you say to yourself things like, "I don't want to hurt his feelings by refusing" or "It's too much trouble to refuse, I'll just do it"? If so, what you're really saying is, "I don't want to say 'No'" or "I'm scared to say 'No'". Instead say, "Thanks a lot. I'll have a coffee with you but I don't want to drink." Try it. Assert yourself and you'll feel better for it and the results will be better than you think.

Don't go over the top. Assert yourself but don't lose your cool.

You can get help in social training groups or assertiveness training groups. These are provided mostly by psychologists and counsellors. Some alcohol and drug counselling services also offer them.



The following books may be of help

When I Say No, I Feel Guilty
by M. J. Smith, Bantam Books.

The Shy Person's Guide to Life
by Michael Bentine, Granada.

Talking to Yourself
by Pamela Butler, Harper and Row.

Being Happy
by Andrew Matthews, Media Masters.

Making Friends
by Andrew Matthews, Media Masters.

Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway
by Susan Jeffers, Arrow.

Cope with problems

Do you drink when you feel down? When you feel depressed for long periods, you get stuck in a low emotional state. Alcohol is a depressant and guaranteed to make this worse.

If you have lost interest in things, if you don't seem to get pleasure out of the things you used to enjoy, if you're not sleeping or you're not eating, see your doctor about it.

Depression responds well to both drug treatments and psychological treatments.

Do you feel down at times without being depressed in the sense that a doctor would use the term? It is still dangerous to use alcohol as a drug to combat this. If you feel down, talk to someone about it. Talking does help. If you can't confide in your support person or your friends or family, go to a doctor, a social worker or a Citizens Advice Bureau – they will have details of counselling services in your area. Alcohol and drug counselling services will offer you help.



The following books and website might also be useful

Beating Depression
by John Rush, Century.

Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway
by Susan Jeffers, Arrow.

depression.org.nz

familyservices.govt.nz/directory

Bereavement

Bereavement leads to depressive feelings for quite a long time after the death of a loved one. This is a dangerous time to start drinking. It may mean that when you stop grieving you can't stop drinking. Find friends and counsellors to help you through this difficult time and avoid using alcohol as a pain-reliever.



This book might help

A Time to Grieve

by Merren Parker, Reed Methuen.

Relationship problems

Relationship problems often lead to drinking or are used as an excuse for continued drinking. Sometimes cause and effect get lost in a jumble of nagging, quarrelling and bad feelings. Sometimes the drinking is the cause of the problems.

If you have relationship problems, talk about them.

It is astonishing how seldom two people who live together sit down and talk about the things that are dividing them. Shouting and accusations take the place of real communication. If you can't talk coolly about your problems, find a neutral person to talk things out with.

There are many people who can help, such as a trained counsellor. A detached view of your disagreements may help you to sort things out.

Many relationships do end in break-up. If strife and unpleasantness have not been part of the splitting-up process, separation or divorce can lead to feelings akin to grief for the couple involved. The likelihood of a return to drinking during such times can increase. There are no easy answers about how to cope with these feelings, although some of the advice given about how to deal with depression and anxiety will be useful.



These books might help

Divorce: How to Cope Emotionally and Practically
by Caroline Shreeve, Turnstone Press.

Breaking Even: Divorce, Your Children and You
by J. Burgoyne, Penguin.

Sexual difficulties

Men who are heavy drinkers have more sexual problems than men who are not. This is because of the effects of alcohol, which, in Shakespeare's words, "provokes the desire but takes away the performance".

Some men and women drink because of sexual difficulties. Drinking makes these difficulties worse.

Often, sexual impotence in a man begins when he fails to get an erection when drunk. This may make him anxious about his performance and this anxiety affects his performance even more. If, on top of all this, his partner is resentful because he has drunkenly and insensitively had sex without showing affection, that anger may make him feel even more insecure. This can result in impotence becoming long term. Such impotence may be remedied, although specialist help may be necessary.

Sexual problems can be remedied. The guidelines are simple. One way to overcome them is to ensure that a sexual relationship is based on a warm and open emotional relationship. The key is communication. Talk about your sexual worries and problems with your partner. Discuss what you like and don't like. This might be difficult and embarrassing at first, but if you can get there the rewards will be promising.

The key elements to overcoming these problems are stopping your drinking, showing affection, communicating, and enjoying sexual preparation and foreplay without bothering too much about the result. If you can do this, there is a good chance the problems will disappear.

These pointers apply to sexual problems in women as well. If you have any doubts, discuss them with your doctor.



Here are some books covering various sexual and related problems

Understanding Human Sexual Inadequacy

by F. Belliveau and L. Richter, Coronet Books.

So You Think You're Attracted to the Same Sex?

by John Hart, Penguin.

The Premenstrual Syndrome: The Curse That Can Be Cured

by Caroline Shreeve, Thorsons.

Life Change: Guide to the Menopause, Its Effects and Treatment by Barbara Evans, Pan.

The Body Electric

by Anne Hooper, Unwin.

Men and Sex

by Bernie Zilbergeld, Fontana.

Sexual Happiness

by Maurice Yaffe, Dorling Kindersley.

Woman's Experience of Sex

by Sheila Kitzinger, Penguin.

Insomnia

Quite a number of people use alcohol to help them sleep. If you take a small 'nightcap' that has stayed the same for the past few years, you probably don't need to worry. If the amount you need to get you to sleep is increasing, you will be creating a problem and should cut down. Some people use alcohol to help them sleep, although the sleep is not restful.

Heavy drinking causes sleep problems, and it takes a while to return to a normal sleeping pattern once drinking has stopped.

Many of the methods for dealing with anxiety may be used for insomnia. As with sexual problems, worries about performance often inhibit the performance itself. Wait until you're tired before going to bed, even if this is two or three o'clock in the morning. Some people only need four or five hours' sleep while some need nine or ten. Maybe you're trying to sleep more than you need to. Get up and read, or watch TV if you can't sleep. If you still have problems, see your doctor.

Unemployment

Becoming unemployed means many things for a person, most of them stressful. It can mean isolation, boredom, poverty, feelings of failure and not knowing what to do with your time.

Structure your day so that you are not left with too much free time. Meet other people regularly – for instance, in a local unemployment resource centre. Although it cannot solve money problems, become involved with a voluntary organisation. It helps to fill your day and brings you into contact with other people, and you are doing something worthwhile. Being in contact with other people can lead to information about jobs.

Taking up meaningful distractions from drinking is a big step towards recovery.



These books offer further advice

The Survivor's Guide to Unemployment and Redundancy
by Joy Melville, Corgi.

Coping with Change
by Iain McCormick, Touche Ross.

Cope with the craving for alcohol

When you feel a strong urge to drink, it may come out of the blue, or it may appear in certain situations or at certain times.

Craving can feel like anxiety; you crave alcohol when you're anxious. Boredom causes a strong urge to drink.

Here are some alternatives when you feel the urge to start or continue drinking.

Delay

Rather than drink immediately after you feel the urge, delay your drinking for as long as possible. The urge to drink will pass. While you're delaying, follow the next hint.

Distraction

Craving is partly to do with your mind focusing on thoughts and images of alcohol. Change these thoughts and you will stop craving, and the best way to change your thoughts is by distracting yourself from thinking about drinking. Choose an activity that you enjoy and that is easy to do without preparation.

You could practise relaxation methods or you might go for a run or a swim. Eat something, listen to music, read, watch television or simply go for a walk.

If you have hobbies or interests, immerse yourself in them for a while. If you do this, you will reduce the craving.

The important thing is to have an alternative activity planned and ready so that when craving creeps up on you, you nip it in the bud.

You might drink a large non-alcoholic drink, because thirst can be part of craving.

Think

Do you say things to yourself like, *"I really need a drink"*? If you do when you are craving alcohol, this will make the craving worse. These thoughts are irrational and untrue. You don't need a drink – you may want one but you don't need it.

The next time you feel a strong urge to drink that conflicts with your drinking rules, recognise the thoughts and challenge them. Replace them with, *"I don't need a drink"* or *"I don't have to drink"*.

You can change irrational thinking, and if you replace it with rational thinking you'll conquer craving.

Problem-solve

Do you drink more heavily when you run into problems and difficulties in your life? Do problems at home, problems with money, problems at work lead you to drink heavily?

The methods discussed above, to do with alternative ways of coping with anxiety, depression and lack of confidence, will be useful in coping with life's problems. Take a detached view of the problem and you will find a solution. Stop yourself reacting to problems by saying *"Oh no, I can't cope"* or *"My life is a mess"* or *"What's the point, everything's against me"*, because these thoughts bury you deeper in the problems and make it harder for you to see them clearly.

Problem-solving skills training is a systematic way of approaching problems.

Try these ideas:

Detach yourself from the problem

Imagine that you're an outside observer or consultant called in to sort out the difficulty. Don't act impulsively. Wait and say to yourself, *"I must stand back and look at this calmly."*

Spell out the problem

Be specific. Don't pass things off with vague phrases like *"My marriage is no good"*. Instead, say exactly what the problem is – for example, *"My wife complains that I never spend any time with her"*. Or instead of saying, *"I hate my job"*, spell out precisely what the problem with the job is, eg *"I don't like my boss; he's always looking over my shoulder"*.

Brainstorm for solutions

Remember how you used brainstorming to come up with possible activities as an alternative to drinking? The principle is the same here, applied to solutions to a particular problem.

Examples of solutions that might emerge from brainstorming on the “I don’t like the boss” theme include:

- leave the job
- ask the boss to leave you alone
- go out for a coffee with the boss and talk
- request a meeting with the boss to talk things over
- ask for a transfer to another boss
- complain to his superior
- ask him why he feels he has to watch you
- get together with the other employees and form a deputation
- ignore him and don’t let him get to you.

Decide on the best solution

See the problem in a detached way and come up with some solutions, then weed out the impractical ones. Go over the most likely ones with a support person or a friend. Decide on your course of action.

Act

Be ready to change the decision if, after a fair try, it is not the right one. Where the solution requires you to do something that doesn’t come easily to you, practise in advance. For instance, if you have decided that you have to confront the boss, practise your approach and what you will say – either on your own or preferably with a friend or support person.

These guidelines will help to sort out problems, although not all problems have solutions. Work out your difficulties with a neutral person. This makes it easier to achieve the detachment necessary to solve problems.

Don’t bottle up your worries. There are self-help groups for many types of problems, ranging from compulsive gambling to bereavement. Ask at your Citizens Advice Bureau whether there is an organisation catering for your needs in your area.



Other useful books

Retirement

Years Ahead: Getting the Most from Retirement
by Robert Dougall, Ward Lock.

Children

Coping with Young Children
by Jo Douglas and Naomi Richman,
Penguin.

Tranquillisers

Life without Tranquillisers
by V. Coleman, Piatkus.

Communicating with others

You Can Communicate
by Iris Barrow, Reed.

Self-help

Self-Esteem
by Matthew McKay and Patrick
Fanning, New Harbinger.



Decision-making

Decisively Me and Positively Me
by Marjorie Manthei,
Heinemann Reed.

General

The Wellness Workbook
by John Travis and Regina Ryan,
Ten Speed Press.

Anger

The Anger Workbook
by Lorraine Bilodeau, Compcare.

Feeling Angry, Playing Fair: A Guide to Change by Ken McMaster, Reed.

But, whatever your problems, never forget this simple fact: heavy drinking makes your problems worse.

Next steps

Once you have been working on cutting down for a month or so, get a copy of the booklet *Maintaining the change*. This gives you tips on how to avoid and/or deal with any slips you have in your drinking.

If you're not coping, ask your doctor if you can see a counsellor. They'll give you the number of the nearest alcohol and drug counselling service. Ring the Alcohol Drug Helpline on **0800 787 797** and it will give you the number of your nearest centre.

To finish, how about a quiz to test your knowledge on alcohol:

The effects of alcohol

	True	False
1. Abuse of alcohol causes as much damage in society as heroin and other hard drugs.		
2. Alcohol is primarily a stimulant drug.		
3. Alcohol will warm you up on a cold day.		
4. Alcohol can kill you by stopping your breathing.		
5. Alcohol spreads through your body very slowly.		
6. Only the liver removes alcohol from the bloodstream.		
7. Alcohol contains: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • proteins • carbohydrates • vitamins. 		
8. How long does it take your body to get rid of the alcohol in two pints of beer? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • two hours • three hours • four hours. 		
9. You can sober up by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • drinking lots of black coffee • taking a cold shower • getting some fresh air. 		
10. Alcohol can affect the vitamin balance of your body.		
11. In two pints of beer there are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 150 calories • 350 calories • 550 calories. 		
12. Drinking spirits is more dangerous than beer.		

Answers

1. False – it causes many times more damage.
2. False – it is a depressant drug.
3. False – it takes heat away from the body.
4. True – but only after drinking very large amounts very rapidly.
5. False – it only takes a few minutes.
6. True – that's why the liver gets overworked if you drink too much.
7. No; No; No.
8. Four hours.
9. All false – only time can sober you up.
10. True – it gives you nutritional problems.
11. 550.
12. False – remember, a half-pint of beer is just as strong as one measure of spirits.

Check chart	Yes	No
Part 1: Do you enjoy a drink?		
Have you decided this guide is suitable for you and that you'll give it a real try?		
Part 2: Why should you cut down?		
Do you now know how many SDs there are in what you drink?		
Have you figured out how much you drink during a typical drinking occasion?		
Part 3: How can you cut down?		
Have you found someone who will help you to cut down?		
Have you started your 'drinking diary'?		
Have you found out what circumstances are common to your troublesome drinking sessions and what are common to your trouble-free sessions?		
Have you filled in 'My drinking rules'?		
Have you filled in 'my per-occasion cut-off'?		
Have you decided the best method to use for slowing down your drinking?		
Have you written down some rewards you will give yourself when you succeed?		
Have you written down some mental rewards?		
Have you asked another person to help you?		
Have you decided to use some of the methods described to help cut down your drinking?		
Part 4: Coping with difficulties		
Do you understand how hangover symptoms are similar to anxiety symptoms?		
If you suffer from anxiety, have you tried the methods suggested to help reduce your anxiety?		
Have you taken steps to start doing other things like sports, hobbies and so forth, as alternatives to drinking?		
If the problems described in this part are causing you to drink more, have you tried the ideas suggested to help solve them without alcohol?		

Te Whatu Ora – Health New Zealand

Freephone: 0508 258 258

Email: enquiries@hpa.org.nz

For help contact the Alcohol

Drug Helpline on **0800 787 797**

To order resources visit resources.alcohol.org.nz

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