Maintaining the change

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 will help you to maintain the changes you have already made to the way you're drinking. It has some ways of helping you to stay on track or get back on track after a slip or relapse.

If you are only just deciding you want to make a change to your drinking, see the other booklets in the Alcohol and Your Health series: *Cutting down* and *Stopping drinking.*

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Part 1

Hold on to what you've gained

If you're reading this booklet, it means you're doing well in changing your drinking habits. Congratulations! You possibly feel the benefits already. But hang on a moment, you're not out of the woods yet. Don't feel over-confident about your new way of life. Think carefully about how you'll hold on to what you've gained. It's possible you'll have a slip or a relapse.

Slips and relapses

A slip occurs in an unguarded moment when you give in to a strong urge to drink or you get caught by circumstances, and you have a drink or go over your limit. But you still want to stop or stick to your goal. A relapse is when you give up, go back to your old heavy drinking ways, and all the progress you've made appears to be lost.

There are reasons for slips and relapses. The main reason is coming across a situation that you associate with heavy drinking – you throw caution to the wind and go on a drinking spree. An example would be meeting a group of people you used to drink with. As well as situations in everyday life, there are moods and emotions, like anger, depression or anxiety, that are linked with a high risk of relapse and with heavy drinking.

To deal with high-risk situations, the best thing you can do is be ready for them before they happen. Do this by anticipating the danger times that apply especially to you.

Everyone has difficulties in preventing relapse, depending on their individual circumstances. Later in this booklet, you'll find out your danger points. For the moment, however, think in more general terms about the situations, feelings and emotions that are linked with relapse.

On the next page is a list of high-risk situations that people find difficult to deal with without experiencing the urge to drink heavily. Imagine yourself as you are just now in each of the situations. Rate your confidence in resisting the urge to drink.

The scale is from 0 to 10. If you're very confident of resisting the urge to drink heavily again, you might score as high as 8 or 10. If you're unsure one way or the other, you would probably score 4-6. If you think you would have great difficulty in not drinking, you would probably score 0 or 2 on the confidence scale.

I can resist the urge to drink heavily...

1. When I'm anxious, tense or under stress.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

2. When I'm bored and there's nothing else to do.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

3. When I'm with people who are drinking heavily.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

4. When I'm depressed or lonely.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

5. When I'm shy or lacking in confidence.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

6. When I'm in a very good mood or want to celebrate.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

7. When I'm frustrated by life's problems.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

8. When I've had a row or argument with someone.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

9. When I'm angry or irritable.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

10. When I want a drink.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

11. When I want a 'pick-me-up'.

0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10

Survive the high risks

There is an old saying: 'forewarned is forearmed'. This applies to the high-risk situations you have just checked. If you give any of them a rating of 4 or lower, it means there's a high chance of a slip or relapse. If you know this, you'll be less likely to slip or relapse. Why? Because you won't taken by surprise. You will have thought about how to cope without drinking. When there's a danger of a slip or relapse, avoid the situation completely. For example, if you'd be tempted to drink if you met a group of friends who drink heavily, avoid these people.

Some high risks are difficult to avoid, especially those prompted by anger or depression. What you do is learn to cope without relapsing.

Learn to cope

Go through a series of situations one by one and think about how you would cope with them without drinking. Pay attention to those situations that you identify as high risk for you (where you gave confidence ratings of 4 or less). Each of the following sections offers advice, and will be useful when you experience difficulty.

1. When I'm anxious, tense or under stress

You might have drunk to get rid of unpleasant feelings of anxiety and tension. If a dangerous time for you is when you're anxious or tense, re-read the section 'Coping with difficulties' in the *Cutting down* or the *Stopping drinking* booklet. Practise the relaxation exercises, and rehearse how you will cope without alcohol. Remember – whatever the cause of your anxiety or tension, drinking just makes it worse.

2. When I'm bored and there's nothing else to do

If this is a high-risk situation, boredom is a problem you need to tackle to prevent a relapse. You may have found yourself saying, *"But there's nothing else to do around here but drink."* If so, think again, because it isn't true. Go back to either the *Cutting down* or the *Stopping drinking* booklet and re-read the section on coping with boredom, which is in the 'Coping with difficulties' section.

3. When I'm with people who are drinking heavily

This is one of the most common reasons for a relapse. Drinking is a strong habit and when you come across people you used to drink with, it's easy to slip back into your old drinking ways. Social situations like parties, weddings and other celebrations are part of

everyday life and involve drinking. For many people, going to a party, where everyone is enjoying themselves and getting drunk, is one of the high-risk situations to overcome.

What can you do? First, if this is a high-risk situation for you, avoid drinking groups where people are drinking. The less confident you are, the longer you should keep avoiding them. If you checked 0–2 for this situation, you should wait at least three months before you re-enter this kind of situation. Don't go to pubs where you are likely to meet your old drinking mates. Turn down invitations to parties or social functions. These are small sacrifices to make if you want to hold on to the progress you've made. Think of reasons for turning down invitations and list them now. There are a couple of suggestions below to get you started.

Eventually you'll have to face situations where other people are drinking. You can't avoid these social occasions forever. If avoidance is your only way of coping, you could be taken by surprise if one day you find yourself in drinking company without any plans for dealing with it. Learn how to refuse drinks without giving offence.

You're the one who decides when, where and how much you drink or that you will not drink. You need to rehearse ways of refusing drinks. You can say, *"No thanks, I'm cutting down"* or *"Looking after the weight"* or *"Sorry, doctor's orders."* (Look back at the exercises in the *Stopping drinking* or the *Cutting down* booklet.) These skills are useful for dealing with drinking groups when you can't avoid them, but the best way to ensure you don't relapse is to take up other interests.

Develop a hobby, interest or activity that you find enjoyable and would rather do than spend your time drinking.

Reasons for turning down invitations

1. "I'm sorry, I have something else on that night."
2. "I'm not feeling up to going out. How about another time?"
3.
4.
5.
6.

4. When I'm depressed or lonely

Many people drink to cheer themselves up when they feel down. Drinking, especially heavy drinking, rarely works. When you're depressed for long periods, you get stuck in a low emotional state. Alcohol will make this worse.

If you have lost interest in things or don't get pleasure out of the things you used to enjoy, see your doctor about it. Depression responds well to both drug and psychological treatments, but you must see your doctor for help. Read the 'Coping with difficulties' section in either the *Cutting down* or the *Stopping drinking* booklet.

5. When I'm shy or lacking in confidence

Some people drink because they lack confidence in company, feel shy or find it hard to stick up for themselves. This happens when they meet new people or people to whom they feel inferior for some reason. Shyness and low self-confidence can be a problem when meeting people you are attracted to. Read the section on confidence in the 'Coping with difficulties' section in the *Cutting down* or *Stopping drinking* booklet.

6. When I'm in a very good mood or want to celebrate

Some people start drinking again when they're depressed; others are at risk when they feel happy. Both these occasions can be high-risk situations for the same person.

Happiness can lead to relapse because drinking alcohol and getting a bit drunk go with celebrating or having a good time. Christmas, New Year, birthdays, going away on holiday – for many people these are all danger times. If you come into some money or have more money than usual, this can also be a trigger for a drinking spree.

How can you guard against a relapse in these circumstances? Being aware of the danger is half the battle. And make sure you have prepared another way of celebrating.

In the case of having some extra cash, this is easy. Put it in the bank or think of some luxury you have wanted and treat yourself. If there is no money involved, think of something different you can do for a change – cook a special meal, organise a day trip, go fishing or visit your grandchildren.

If you're planning a holiday, concentrate on the interesting and exciting things – new places to visit, new activities like windsurfing or water-skiing, new people to meet, and so on.

Being in a good mood is a time to be especially careful about getting trapped into buying rounds or accepting drinks you don't want.

7. When I'm frustrated by life's problems

People drink when they run into problems. Problems at home and at work, and difficulties with money and relationships can all lead to a relapse. Dealing with anxiety, depression and lack of confidence will be useful here. Take a detached view of the problem and find a solution. Refer to the 'Coping with difficulties' section of the *Stopping drinking* or *Cutting down* booklet.

8. When I've had a row or an argument with someone

Quarrels you have with your husband, wife or partner can lead to a relapse. Relationship problems are used as an excuse for returning to heavy drinking. People will relapse in order to punish the other person. What they're saying is, *"Look what you've done. You've made me get drunk again. It's all your fault."* When you argue, make sure you don't use drinking as emotional blackmail. Read the section on relationship problems in the 'Coping with difficulties' section in the *Stopping drinking* or *Cutting down* booklet to get more information.

9. When I am angry or irritable

People think of getting drunk to deal with anger and negative feelings. Have an alternative way of coping planned and ready to use. Have a person, or a choice of people, your supporters, who you can talk to about the reasons for your anger. This person (or people) needs to be sympathetic but neutral and objective enough to give you advice.

Even if the person you choose is unavailable, avoid acting on impulse by drinking. Be cool and think about how you can reduce your angry mood. The techniques of problem-solving in *Stopping drinking* or *Cutting down* can be applied here. It's important that you relax. Only by relaxing will you be less angry and resentful. Use the relaxation techniques provided in the booklets mentioned above. Your reasons for being angry will be justified, and it will be only right that you feel upset. But getting drunk won't help you at all. Drinking will inflame your feelings and distort the situation. Your anger will be left unchanged.

Some people find it hard to be angry. They bottle things up and say nothing, or say something different from how they feel. They explode much later in response to some trivial incident, when they should have been much firmer before. These people have difficulty in saying *"No"*. Getting drunk is a way of dealing with frustrated anger.

Alcohol allows the anger to come out, although this does nothing to help you to be angry at the right time and place, or in the right way. If this applies to you, the advice on assertiveness skills in the *Stopping drinking* or the *Cutting down* booklet will be useful.

If you are unable to be assertive, even with the help of a trusted relative or friend, you may benefit from attending an assertiveness training class or reading one of the many self-help books available.

10. When I want a drink

Do you have a strong urge or craving to drink? This may come out of the blue, or it may come at particular times. Here are suggestions to deal with the urge to start or continue drinking.

Delay

Rather than drinking after the craving comes over you, delay for as long as possible. When you do this, the urge to drink will pass. While you're delaying, you can follow the second hint.

Distraction

Craving is to do with your mind focusing on thoughts and images of alcohol. If you change these thoughts, you will stop craving. And the best way to do this is to distract yourself from thoughts of drinking.

Choose an activity you enjoy that's easy to do without preparation. Practise relaxation methods. Go for a walk, a run or a swim. Eat something, listen to music, read, watch television or go to a movie. Drink a large non-alcoholic drink, because thirst can be part of craving. The important thing is to have an alternative planned and ready. So when you recognise a craving, you nip it in the bud.

Think

Do you say things to yourself like, *"I really need a drink"*? If this goes through your mind when you're 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 have a drink that doesn't fit with your drinking limit or drinking rules, challenge it. Replace it with *"I don't need a drink"* or *"I don't have to drink."* Changing your thoughts takes practice. The difficult part is to act on these irrational thoughts as they occur. If you challenge them, you will conquer your craving.

11. When I want a 'pick-me-up'

It is not uncommon when feeling tired or flat to desire a drink to raise your energy level. Get a burst of energy from a fizzy non-alcoholic drink or a cup of coffee, or energetic exercise. Be prepared for these occasions, and have alternatives planned.

Part 2

Just coping

So far in this booklet, we've taken a general look at the kinds of situation that are likely to lead to relapse. Advice has been given about each type of situation to help you deal with the causes of relapse. This advice is for everyone who has cut down or stopped drinking and is trying to maintain their progress. Let's be specific now and concentrate on you. Everybody's circumstances and personalities differ, and it's best if your plans for dealing with a relapse are specific. They should apply to only one person – you.

1. Write down details of your high-risk situations

Write down the details of high-risk situations that you know are most likely to happen to you. Look back at the ratings you gave for the high-risk situations. Select those for which you gave confidence ratings of 4 or lower. Now think of an actual situation within each high-risk category that is likely to happen to you. Say you have a rating of 4 or lower for 'When I've had a row or an argument with someone'. Write down in detail an actual situation relating to this. Who was the row with and what was it about? For example, 'I had a blazing row with my wife about spending too much time out of the house'. Don't just put, 'I had a quarrel'.
If you gave a rating of 4 or lower to 'When I'm in a very good mood', don't just write, 'I feel like celebrating'. Write something like, 'I've just been paid and all my friends are going for a drink before they go home'. Find it difficult to imagine what high-risk situations will crop up in your life? You are the expert about your own life. Nobody else knows about it as you do.

To help come up with your typical high-risk situations, think back to previous attempts at cutting down or stopping drinking, and why you had those relapses. Think of those moods that you associate with wanting to drink heavily, because these will be high-risk situations for you.

2. Your coping

After you've described your typical high-risk situation(s), write down better ways of dealing or coping with it without going back to drinking. These better ways of coping should be about you - things you believe you can do successfully. To help you, listed on the next page are typical ways that people find useful. There are two types of coping, both involving an alternative to drinking. They are: better ways of behaving and better ways of thinking.

Here are some examples of each:

Better ways of behaving

- Telephone a friend
- Stick to the company of moderate or non-drinkers
- Stay indoors – avoid the high-risk situation
- Relax
- Leave my money at home
- Cheer myself up by buying something special instead
- Do a hobby or something I really enjoy
- Keep away from people who drink
- Go for a walk
- Get in touch with old friends who don't drink
- Eat a good meal
- Stay away from places where I used to drink
- Start to do something about the house
- Go to sleep
- Force myself to do some work
- Leave a place when I feel tempted to drink

Better ways of thinking

- How much better off I am financially since changing the habit
- Think of the mess I got myself into by drinking
- Examine my motives and get rid of the false ones
- The promises I've made to others
- Show my face again without fear of what others will think
- Face up to my bad feelings instead of drowning them in alcohol
- Drinking alcohol is just not worth it
- Remember how I've let my family and friends down before
- Look on the bright side and stop making excuses for myself
- Drink affects my health
- Think of all the people who have helped me
- How my drinking has affected my partner, family and friends
- How much better I feel without drinking

These are only some better ways of behaving and thinking. You decide on other ways that will work for you. There are two things to avoid when deciding on your list.

1. Don't put yourself down

Don't be self-critical: *"What a fool I am to think of having another drink"* or *"I am weak-willed".* These thoughts are not helpful. Instead, think of things that bolster your confidence, such as, *"Well done, I am doing something about this!"*

2. Don't rely on willpower

Relying on willpower to get you through is not a good idea. You need a definite plan. Don't write, 'I'll just be strong-willed enough to not drink'. Your willpower won't be strong enough on its own. Before you start writing, here are a few examples to help you get started.

Example 1: Janine's story

Janine is single and works for a large firm. She used to be in the habit of going for a drink after work with her friends from the office, who were all pretty heavy drinkers. Janine usually drank five or six glasses of wine before going home. She has broken this habit and wants to keep it that way. She has rediscovered an interest in playing netball, which she used to be very good at, and is trying to get really fit.

High-risk situation:
"I'm just leaving the office and I meet Joe and/or Maria who try to talk me into coming for a quick one in the pub over the road."

What she does:
"I think to myself how much fitter I feel since I cut down/stopped, and how much harm alcohol was doing to my body. I tell my friends, 'No thanks, I'm off home,' and if they really persist, I just laugh it off and tell them how I am into training and getting fit for netball. I then go home and do some training before dinner."

Example 2: Peter's story

Peter's relationship broke up a couple of years ago. Although he had a few good friends, he was often on his own and tended to feel sorry for himself and rather depressed at the way his life was going. At these times, he frequently drank a great deal at home to make himself feel better, especially at weekends. However, he has succeeded in changing the habit. A good friend of his, Bob, knows about the situation and has agreed to help in any way he can until Peter gets back on his feet and can cope on his own.

High-risk situation:
"I'm sitting alone in the house on a Saturday night watching TV and I think of all the people out enjoying themselves. I suddenly feel I need a drink."

What he does:
"I remind myself that getting drunk is not going to change my situation. I phone Bob and arrange to meet him tomorrow. If he can't make it tomorrow, I don't feel hurt because I know he has his own life to lead. I have a brief chat with Bob about my worries, then think positively about how I can meet more people and start enjoying myself again."

Example 3: Lee's story

Lee is married with three children under 10 years of age. For a couple of years, he was having frequent rows with his wife, Fiona, about his drinking. When this happened, he usually went down to the local for more to drink and blamed it on Fiona. He has now managed to break the habit.

High-risk situation:
"It's after dinner on a night during the week and I say I feel like going down to the pub for a drink. Fiona immediately flies off the handle and says I haven't changed a bit, I'm still the same selfish so-and-so I've always been."

What he does:
"Instead of shouting back and slamming out of the house, I remember how I used to try to get my own back by getting drunk. Although I feel Fiona's remarks are unfair, I try to relax and talk to her about the situation. We ask an aunty to babysit for Friday night so we can go out for a meal together."

What will you do?

With these examples to help you, and remembering the advice on high-risk situations earlier, fill in the spaces provided below. Identify all the high-risk situations that apply to you, together with a plan of what you will do. Write down at least one entry for each of the high-risk situations for which you gave confidence ratings of 4 and below.

If you think of more than one actual situation that might crop up, write down an entry for each. For example, if having rows or arguments is a high-risk one for you, deal separately with rows you have with your husband, your wife or partner, or children, and rows you have with the boss at work or your mates. You can combine more than one better way of behaving or thinking to come up with your final plan for an actual situation. Use as many or as few of the blank spaces as you need.

High-risk situation	Coping response

Are my plans any good?

You may wonder if the plans you have written down are any good. Are they appropriate? Will they work? Don't worry about this. The important thing is to have plans ready to use. If you follow the advice given in this booklet, you'll come up with plans that will help you.

However, if you want some feedback about the ideas you have decided on, discuss them with someone close to you. If this is not possible, see a counsellor who will discuss them with you. It's up to you. As long as you decide on plans that are comfortable and appropriate to you, that is more than half the struggle in avoiding a relapse.

If you do have a slip or a relapse – don't give up

Be realistic. Slips and relapses are often part of getting better. However determined you are that you will stick to your drinking goal, and however skilled you become at coping with high-risk situations, it is possible that you will have a slip, or even a relapse. Hopefully this won't happen and you'll be successful in your new lifestyle. But it's still important to prepare yourself for what will happen if you do have a slip or relapse. Remember this golden rule:

Golden rule

One slip does not mean you have ruined everything. The proverb says, 'One swallow doesn't make a summer'. It's the same for slips. Slipping once does not mean you are back to square one. If you're learning to play a new sport, say golf or skateboarding, you will not show steady improvement week by week. On some days you will perform well, and on others you'll feel as awkward as you did at the beginning. Does this mean you've lost everything you learned on the golf course? Of course not, as learning is not smooth and unfaltering.

The same applies to learning to change your drinking. There may be times when you do badly and think it's all a waste of time. You might feel as if you're losing control over your drinking again. *"I'm right back to square one"* or *"It's no use, I can't do it"* or *"I might as well be hanged for a sheep as a lamb"* are some of the things you might think. Don't listen. Think of your slip as something you can put behind you and overcome.

Do not give up trying to change. Stay calm and think about the reasons for the slip. Learn from the experience. Then the next time the situation that brought about the slip comes up, be ready for it. Plan a better way of coping with it.

If you do have a complete relapse and return to your old drinking ways, all is not lost. Stop. Seek help from a specialist service that will provide some extra support for your resolve. Counsellors assist with exercises similar to the ones outlined in these booklets. Maybe there are other difficulties that need to be sorted out before your drinking problems can be overcome. Never give up. Relapses are often part of getting better.

Change your lifestyle

Maintaining your drinking within lower limits or stopping drinking completely is about changing your lifestyle. When you were a (heavy) drinker, a large part of your time and energy revolved around the business of drinking alcohol. Drinking occupied the centre of your attention. Now make changes. Adopt a new way of life that you enjoy and get satisfaction from, but that does not have drinking at its centre. This is why you develop alternative activities to drinking – taking up sports or games, discovering new hobbies or special interests, making new friends who are not drinkers, and so on. Just cutting out drinking from your life is unlikely to be sufficient. Find something to replace it if it's to become a permanent change. Find other ways of getting your rewards and pleasures. There are many things in life more rewarding than drinking.

!

Remember what all this is about:

1. What are the problems?
2. What will happen if I don't stop drinking?
3. What kind of a person (for example, mother, father, grandparent, husband, wife, partner, of value to others, self-respecting) do I want to be and how is the drinking getting in the way of being that person?
4. Having regard for others and those I am responsible for and accountable to.
5. My beliefs and the confidence that what I am doing is right.
6. Knowing that my actions are morally and ethically right, and that I am acting in an honourable manner.

How has drinking affected these values for you?

Best of luck and good health – it's in your hands!

Notes

Notes

Te Whatu Ora – Health New Zealand

Freephone: 0508 258 258
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For help contact the Alcohol Drug Helpline on *0800 787 797*

To order resources visit *resources.alcohol.org.nz*

AL594 | JUL 2022 ISBN 978-1-927224-06-9 (PRINT)
978-1-927224-07-6 (ONLINE)

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