

Hope and Solutions

Options and Tips for Avoiding Problems Related to Alcohol Use

by Michael Bell, MD, Psychiatrist

Staff who work in healthcare settings see clients everyday who are on the brink, or know from experience with their own families that anyone can be susceptible to developing problems due to alcohol. Alcohol and other drug abuse (AODA) issues affect a significant number of people from all walks of life. Those who have experienced an addiction or have relatives who've struggled to maintain sobriety, often understand the difficulties involved. It is a challenge to practice abstinence or maintain stability when someone has a pattern of turning to substances to cope with stress or deal with problems in life. Even for those who use alcohol in moderation, there is a delicate balance in not letting use become abuse.

The following tips can help both individuals in the process of recovery, as well as those who are concerned that they may be at risk of drinking out of control:

- Know who you are. Talk with your doctor to identify if you are a low-risk, high-risk, problem drinker or dependent drinker. This information can give you insight on your drinking patterns, which can guide effective treatment.
- Who's on your team? Lining up support is essential for long-term success. Seek support from friends, family, AA/NA groups and other social organizations.
- Know and avoid your triggers. Often, environmental factors play a role in relapse. Triggers can include people, places and things. Even certain smells or television commercials can help spark interest in using alcohol.
- Today, medication options exist which are FDA-Approved to treat almost every phase of Alcoholism and Abuse. Discuss with your doctor if this option is right for you.
- Take time to write down the good things about drinking from your experience. Drinking can help many people feel more social and relaxed. Then take the next step and write down your negative experiences with drinking alcohol. This may include getting a DUI, health problems, relationship issues, missing work, losing sleep and high-risk behaviors. Think of the good and bad experiences and consider which way the scale tips. In the long run, what is more important to you?
- Link reducing or stopping drinking alcohol to issues that are important to you and as part of an overall plan to improve your health. You may want to join a health club, stop smoking, buy healthier foods and also pay attention to your mental health by perhaps reading more and spending more time with loved ones.
- Consider yoga/mediation/prayer while at the same time enjoying the feeling of breathing deeply and having a clear mind. Learn the art of controlling urges. Many people report that such techniques help urges to fade and lose their power to influence.
- Substance abuse often masks emotional problems that haven't been addressed. Investing in psychotherapy can help you begin to work on these deep-seated issues.
- Get Involved. Tell others about your story. Sharing can help strengthen your resolve to avoid relapses. Substance abuse problems are a common medical disorder. You can help reduce the stigma associated with substance abuse.
- Be good to yourself. Treat yourself for positive behavioral changes. Being good to yourself doesn't have to involve large sums of money or time. Treat yourself to a massage, a warm bath or an afternoon movie. Likewise, forgive yourself for negative behavior and move on. It is never too late to change. Changing substance abuse patterns often involves multiple stops and starts. Remember the ancient Japanese proverb, **"fall down seven times, stand up eight"**. If you do so, at the end of the day, you will be standing!

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Taking Care of Yourself Isn't Selfish — It's Often Healthy for You, Others

*by Kimberly Goins, MA, LPC
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Who's Taking Care of YOU?

Get up at 5:30 a.m. Get showered and dressed. Wake up kids at 6 a.m. Get them cleaned, dressed and fed. At 7 a.m., you eat a banana while driving the kids to school, then head to work. At noon, you make an appointment for your mother to go to the doctor. At 5 p.m., you head home, make a stop at the drycleaners and one other errand, then pick up the children from aftercare by 6 p.m. You cook dinner while helping with homework. At 9 p.m., you put the kids in bed. At 10 p.m. you're listening to your husband or significant other discuss his day. By 11 p.m., you're so tired and sleepy, you wonder how you'll manage another non-stop day.

Does this sound like a typical day? Are your days mostly absorbed with focusing on the needs of family, friends or others?

Many women are caught in what's being called the "sandwich generation," raising their children while caring for elderly parents. Today's world does not seem as safe for children, and more demands are placed on parents. Children have scheduled activities that require rides. There are basic things to consider in a child's life if you want to prepare them to get into a good college. Almost everything costs more in terms of time and money. The costs of living often requires most households to have two

incomes. Many single mothers work more than one job to make ends meet.

A recent article in the Washington Post stated that people now have only 2 to 3 friends to lean on for support these days, compared to the past when the number of confidants was reported to be 5 to 6. I feel this may be in part due to the lack of time people have to cultivate relationships with others outside of family.

Technology, which was thought to give us more convenience, seems to actually make us busier with multitasking. Employers often expect us to do more with less. I often see women in grocery stores and driving cars while talking on their cellular phone. Time that used to be spent discussing one's day is now spent taking care of church activities or other extraneous business.

I see many female clients in my work as a psychotherapist. When I pose the question, "What do you do to take care of you?," I often get a blank stare, or am asked to explain what I mean by the question. They'll say they don't have time for self-care; and that it's a luxury that women in high-demand roles, whether due to full-time jobs or being single mothers, simply don't have. They also indicate they feel it would be selfish to focus on themselves. To the contrary, I

remind them that if they do not care for themselves, they will no longer be able to help anyone else. Still, it's troubling to me that it often requires the mention of neglect or harm to others before a lot of women consider taking time for themselves.

Self-care doesn't have to be selfish. It is crucial for health. Not doing so often leads to feelings of depression and anxiety, and a lack of self worth.

If you don't value yourself, you're at greater risk for illness and other negative consequences. When you don't value yourself, you won't demand fair treatment from others. Self-care can be as simple as taking 20 minutes out of each day to nurture yourself. It could be making your bed in the morning, treating yourself to a favorite meal, turning off your cell phone to get your hair done without interruptions, or calling a friend to discuss something that's been on your mind.

Your answer to the above question, "Who's taking care of You?," should become, "I am." You are responsible for yourself. It is unrealistic to expect anyone else to care more about your well-being when you don't consider it a priority. I hope you give yourself permission to feel deserving enough.

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