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link to Drinkaware article [1]



Do you suffer from anxiety? Dr Helen Cowan takes a closer look at anxiety and why drinking alcohol can make those feelings worse.

Alcohol is not the answer

Alcohol can appear to alleviate anxiet [2]y [2]. However, this effect is lost as tolerance develops, leaving you more anxious or depressed [3] as alcohol disrupts your brain chemicals and affects processes in the brain that are vital for good mental health.

Breathing

Some people find slow, deep, regular breathing [4] can help with anxiety. If you're feeling anxious, your breathing is probably shallower than normal: controlling your breathing so that it mimics relaxation can have a relaxing effect. Some people find the 4-7-8 breathing technique helpful: it is known as "relaxing breath" and involves breathing in for 4 seconds, holding the breath for 7 seconds, and exhaling for 8 seconds.

Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)

Different kinds of talking therapies can help you deal with anxiety. In CBT, which is one type of talking therapy, anxious or negative thoughts are given less power as they are approached with curiosity and kindness, challenged, and let go, before being replaced by more helpful thinking patterns. Planning and performing this process at a particular "worry hour" every day can help prevent you from repeatedly chewing over anxious thoughts.

Diagnosis

Feeling anxious affects everybody at some point – it's a natural human response and can aid alertness. But anxiety that lasts too long, or is out of proportion to the threat, or that impairs your everyday life is an anxiety

disorder that needs addressing. Some common symptoms include a fast heartbeat, shortness of breath, sweating, butterflies in the stomach, feelings of detachment, or a loss of control. Changes in behaviour, such as avoiding places – or drinking excessively – are also warning signs.

Epidemic

Anxiety is a major mental health problem worldwide. In any given week, 6 in 100 people [5] are diagnosed with generalised anxiety disorder in England.

Finding help

If you're caught in a vicious cycle of alcohol and anxiety, Drinkaware has plenty of tips and resources to help you regain control. Mind [6] also provide advice and support to anyone experiencing mental health issues and have a dedicated helpline. Other organisations that offer advice and support include the NHS [7], Anxiety UK [8] and No Panic [9].

Gender

According to the Mental Health Foundation, women are twice as likely to be diagnosed with anxiety as men – but three times as many men die by suicide. Mental illness doesn't discriminate, and neither should we. Men are less likely to access psychological therapies than women, with only 36% of referrals to NHS talking therapies being for men. Those who identify as LGBTQ+ are also more likely to experience mental health issues such as anxiety, according to Mind [10].

Hangxiety

Hangover anxiety, or "hangxiety", is another reminder that alcohol is not the answer when addressing anxiety. Check out this Guest blog [11] by Laurie McAllister, who describes the shame and anxiety she often felt the morning after the night before.

Inequalities

Where there's poverty, there's anxiety. According to one report, mental health is shaped by a wide range of characteristics including inequalities and social, economic and physical environments. Poverty can be both a causal factor and a consequence of mental ill-health.[1]

Journaling

Writing down your thoughts and feelings can help put things in perspective. Creating a journal which captures positive emotions and experiences alongside anxious thoughts, and which recounts achievements alongside thought-up catastrophes, can help reframe your thinking and reduce anxiety.

Keeping active

Physical exercise can relieve mental stress far better than alcohol. Endorphins released during exercise make you feel good. A sense of achievement, improvements in sleep, distraction from negative thoughts and normalisation of stress hormone levels can also contribute to mental wellbeing and help manage anxiety.

LGBTQ+

LGBTQ+ people who drink more are more likely to struggle with depression and anxiety than cisgender straight people. Read our guest blog from Brian Ching [12] to find out why and where to get support.

Mental health

Alcohol is linked to a range of mental health [13] issues, not only anxiety. These range from low mood to depression, memory loss and suicid [14]e [14].

Normalising mental health

The most important thing that needs to happen is to normalise mental health, said the Duke of Cambridge at an event entitled, 'The Anxiety Epidemic'. To get people comfortable with the subject and to talk about it, mental health needs to be brought out of the dark and de-stigmatised.

Other people

Loneliness [15] can make feelings of anxiety hard to deal with and may affect how you drink. Meeting other people or just talking to someone, whether it's a friend, relative or support line [16] can help you unload some of your thoughts.

Panic attacks

Coming out of nowhere, these intense experiences of anxiety can be disabling. Lasting anywhere from a few minutes to half an hour, the feeling of intense fear is accompanied by other symptoms of anxiety, such as palpitations, dizziness, shaking, sweating, a dry mouth and nausea. Panic attacks [17] are harmless physically, but if they interfere with your normal activities, you should consider getting help, for example, self-referral to talking therapies.

Quitting or reducing alcohol

Drinking alcohol can contribute to anxiety and panic attacks and develop into a vicious circle. Deciding to cut down or stop drinking completely is a significant and positive step that has many benefits to your health and wellbeing. Read our A to Z guide on how to reduce or stop drinking completely [18].

Support groups

If you suffer from anxiety there are a number of self-help and support groups around the UK that you might find helpful to join. Here's a useful list of groups [19] across the country.

Triggers

Sources of anxiety vary from person to person and can include work problems, finances, family and friends, to your health. Past trauma or changes in your life can all contribute, whilst fake news, FOMO, and a constant bombardment of bad news can make things worse. Understanding your triggers can help to manage those feelings more.

Underage drinking

Children and young people can be tempted to drink to cope with stressful situations or fit in, but drinking alcohol makes anxiety [20] worse. If you're a parent [21] or guardian, having an honest chat with your children about alcohol, peer pressure [22] and the impact of drinking can help them enjoy an alcohol-free childhood.

Voice

Speaking to someone about your anxiety can be really helpful, whether that's a trusted friend or a health professional, it's good to talk.

Wakefulness

Anxiety and insomnia are linked and feed off each other. Adding alcohol to the equation can further disrupt your sleep [23] cycle and so is best avoided.

eXhaustion

Anxiety can wear you down and be debilitating. Try to be kind to yourself and ensure you get enough rest. Unfortunately, drinking alcohol will only make you more tired.

Yoga

In another guest blog, Laurie McAllister shares how she replaced alcohol with yoga to help relieve her stress and anxiety. R [24]ead her [24] full [24] story [24] and discover some helpful tips.

Zebras

In his book, “Why zebras don’t get ulcers”, Professor Robert Sapolsky explains the uniqueness of human anxiety. The very survival of animals, such as zebras, depends on their short-lived stress responses to injury, predators and starvation (think ‘fight or flight’). Humans, in contrast, turn on anxiety for months on end, worrying about mortgages, relationships, and work and chronic stress makes us sick. Be more zebra.

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Source URL:https://www.helencowan.co.uk/z-guide-alcohol-and-anxiety

Links
[1] https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/news/guest-blog-an-a-to-z-guide-to-alcohol-and-anxiety [2] https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/facts/health-effects-of-alcohol/mental-health/alcohol-and-anxiety [3] https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/facts/health-effects-of-alcohol/mental-health/alcohol-and-depression [4] https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities/breathing-exercises-for-stress/ [5] https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/statistics-and-facts-about-mental-health/how-common-are-mental-health-problems/ [6] https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/anxiety-and-panic-attacks/useful-contacts/ [7] https://www.nhs.uk/mental-health/self-help/guides-tools-and-activities/tips-to-reduce-stress/ [8] https://www.anxietyuk.org.uk/ [9] https://nopanic.org.uk/ [10] https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/lgbtiqplus-mental-health/about-lgbtiqplus-mental-health/ [11] https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/news/guest-blog-how-to-manage-your-mental-health-without-alcohol [12] https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/news/guest-blog-alcohol-and-mental-health-in-the-lgbtq-community [13] https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/facts/health-effects-of-alcohol/mental-health/alcohol-and-mental-health [14] https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/facts/health-effects-of-alcohol/mental-health/alcohol-and-suicidal-thoughts [15]

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