



Another Crisis Amidst a Pandemic: Substance Misuse

The potential for harm associated with alcohol and drug use are increasing as the social and economic impact of the coronavirus pandemic continues.

In the wake of past experiences of mass trauma such as natural disasters or economic events, an overall increase in alcohol has been recorded. These events cause widespread impact affecting whole populations. On an individual level, stressors such as job loss, financial pressures, death of a loved one, loss of one's home or relationship breakdowns can lead to an increase in alcohol consumption.

As social restrictions have continued from weeks to months, people are struggling to adapt to their disrupted routines, or have limited access to their self-care strategies such as going to the gym, socialising with friends or undertaking hobbies outside of the home. Relationships are strained by the new pressures of working and living within the home environment. Parents are feeling overwhelmed by the requirement of home schooling and maintaining their work commitments.

Some individuals may find themselves consuming alcohol or using other substances as a means to cope with anxiety, stress, negativity, boredom and our changing environment. The Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE) conducted a poll of 1,045 Australians and found that 70% reported they were drinking more alcohol than usual since the COVID-19 outbreak in Australia.

Like any other toxic substance, alcohol should be treated with caution. Using alcohol to cope can compromise your health in a number of different ways, including:

- Your body's ability to regulate sleep, directly impacting your immune function
- Affects judgement, sight and co-ordination, which can cause accidents especially falls
- It can cause frequent infections
- Impact your ability to concentrate
- Have a detrimental effect on your relationships

This time may pose a challenge for anyone in recovery from drug dependence, when accessing the usual support services may be more difficult to access. As stricter isolation requirements are imposed by the government to prevent the spread of COVID-19 (coronavirus), there is an increased risk of people using drugs alone as they may not be someone there to ask for help if something goes wrong.

Those who have previously experienced problems with alcohol and/or other drugs could find the current situation heightens their risk of relapse.

Managing Your Alcohol Intake:

Monitoring your alcohol intake is important, as alcoholic drinks often vary in strength and serving sizes. This can be harder to do when drinking at home, as we often free-pour rather than using standard measurements like at pubs and restaurants.

Many studies show that to reduce the risk of harm from alcohol-related disease or injury, adults should drink less than ten standard drinks a week and no more than four standard drinks on one day. The less you choose to drink, the lower your risk of alcohol-related harm. For some people not drinking at all is the safest option. The Australian guidelines recommend giving your body time to detox from alcohol by having two alcohol-free days each week.

Strategies to reduce your alcohol intake

- Drink water or other non-alcoholic beverages between each alcoholic drink.
- Don't allow someone else to top up your glass if you're sharing a bottle of wine as you may lose track of how many drinks you've consumed.
- Avoid high-alcohol content beverages, such as stronger beers or wines, and spirits.
- Consume food before and while drinking, to slow your drinking pace and slow the absorption of alcohol.
- Occupy yourself while drinking to reduce the amount you are consuming. For example: play pool, sing karaoke, dance, talk to friends.

Preventing substance use during COVID-19

The problem with today, during a pandemic where individuals are isolated and restricted, is a dependency can begin. The full impact of this dependency may not be visible for some time, long after restrictions ease and individual's return to their normal activities. This emphasizes the need for individuals to recreate order in their life, maintain daily routines and avoid the use of substances to cope during this period of uncertainty.

Strategies to avoid substance use

- Stay connected to your social network, either in-person as restrictions lift or virtually.
- Connect with your social network by undertaking activities or hobbies that don't provide an opportunity for alcohol or substance use.
- Connect with a clinician via the EAP to understand your triggers and develop strategies to manage situations, circumstances and thoughts that can trigger substance use.
- Be physically active by exercising regularly.
- Undertake hobbies such as gardening, yoga, singing, playing music.
- Ensure you maintain a structure and daily routine that includes dressing, eating and other activities of daily living.
- Practice relaxation activities to reduce stress and anxiety levels such as mindfulness.



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Support is Available

The relationship between alcohol, drug use and mental health is a complex one. Just like physical health, your mental health and wellbeing can have a huge impact on all aspects of life. If you notice that your alcohol or drug use is negatively affecting your mood and impacting your life, it may be time to reach out for help.

For individual counselling support, please call 1300 364 273 to book an appointment today.

**Acacia EAP offers support 24/7/365
1300 364 273**

1. Keyes K, Hatzenbuehler M, Hasin D. Stressful life experiences, alcohol consumption, and alcohol use disorders: the epidemiologic evidence for four main types of stressors. *Psychopharmacology*. 2011;218:1-17
2. de Goeij M, Suhrcke M, Toffolutti V, van de Mheen D, Schoenmakers T, Kunst A. How economic crises affect alcohol consumption and alcohol-related health problems: A realist systematic review. *Social science & medicine*. 2015;131:131-46
3. The Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE), YouGov Galaxy Poll of Australians to understand their purchasing and consumption of alcohol during the COVID-19 outbreak in Australia. <https://fare.org.au/wp-content/uploads/COVID-19-POLL.pdf>

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Tel: 1300 364 273 Email: info@acaciaconnection.com Web: www.acaciaconnection.com ABN: 76 156 081 426
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