Alcohol and mood: Drinking while depressed or anxious

Depression and anxiety are very common mental health conditions that can have a profound impact on a person's life. Feelings of depression or anxiety can be isolating and overwhelming, and people need to find ways to cope with these difficult feelings. Some people drink alcohol to try to help them feel better, but for people who struggle with anxiety or depression, alcohol usually makes these feelings more intense. This can lead to a vicious cycle of feeling bad, drinking to feel better, and then feeling worse.

This pamphlet contains information about how alcohol affects people with anxiety or depression, what the risks are, and alternative ways to cope with bad feelings.
Isn't it normal to relax with a drink?

Alcohol is a depressant, meaning it slows down our central nervous system and makes us feel more relaxed. This may seem like a good thing for someone who has anxiety, but drinking can actually make anxiety worse in the long run. Alcohol’s ability to relieve anxiety is temporary, and when it wears off, the anxiety is often more intense than it originally was. Also, when we regularly use alcohol to help us relax, it becomes harder for us to relax without it, and over time we may have to start using more to achieve the same effect.

But drinking makes me feel better.

In small amounts, alcohol can have a euphoric effect. This is because alcohol causes a release of dopamine, a chemical that makes us feel good. However, the more we drink, the more likely we are to start feeling angry, hostile, or sad. When a person with depression has some quick drinks in order to try to feel better, they often experience a rapid improvement in their mood followed immediately by a crash. Once we’ve gotten stuck in this cycle, it’s hard to get out of it.

Does this mean I’m an alcoholic?

The way people drink can be described on a spectrum. Some people don’t drink at all. Some drink in a low-risk way, meaning that their alcohol consumption is not likely to be harmful to themselves or others. Some drink in a risky way, meaning that they are in danger of experiencing alcohol-related harms. And some have alcohol use disorder, which means that alcohol is causing serious problems in their lives.

Wherever your drinking falls on the spectrum, depression and anxiety usually push you further along on that spectrum. Rather than focusing on a label like “alcoholic”, it’s often more helpful to think about your reasons for drinking and the consequences of drinking in order to start making space for change.

How do I get better?

Alcohol problems and mood or anxiety disorders are very closely connected to each other, and getting help for one will almost definitely help the other. Anxiety, depression, and alcohol use disorder can all be treated with medication and counselling. A health care provider can help you determine what types of treatment will work best for you.

It’s hard to cope with my feelings when I’m not drinking. What should I do?

When you’re trying to stop using alcohol to help you cope with feelings of depression or anxiety, it’s important to find new ways of coping with those feelings. Here are some things you can try when you’re feeling anxious or depressed:

- Check in with your body. Are you hungry? Thirsty? Tired? Sore? Give your body what it needs, whether it’s a snack, a glass of water, a nap, or some exercise or stretches.
- Write down your thoughts and feelings. This helps get them out of your head.
- Reach out to a friend or family member that you trust (and don’t drink with).
- Engage in a hobby or other interest. If you don’t have one, find one! What have you always wanted to try?
- Try meditation or prayer.
- Ground yourself in the moment. Focus on what you see, hear, smell, and feel. Hold a comforting object.
- Relax your body one muscle at a time.
- Treat yourself to an indulgence that you really enjoy, like a massage, a hot bath, or an ice cream sundae.
- Be kind to yourself. Remind yourself that feelings don’t last forever and that you’ll get through this.