

What's the connection between alcohol and mood?

Alcohol is a **psychoactive** substance, meaning that it causes changes in how we think, act, and feel. The more you drink, the more affected your nervous system becomes.



This can change our mood in the short term: having a few drinks can make us feel more relaxed at first, but **usually makes us feel worse** within a few hours. It can also have long-term consequences for how we feel. This is especially problematic for people who suffer from **depression** or an **anxiety disorder**.

How do I know if I have depression or an anxiety disorder?

Everyone feels sad or anxious from time to time. However, our moods and anxiety levels usually **reflect what's going on in our lives**: when we experience events that are emotionally challenging, we might feel sad, and when we're going through things that are stressful or scary, we tend to feel anxious. If you experience sadness or anxiety that seems out of proportion with what's going on in your life, or if these feelings seem to stick around for a long time, you may have **depression** or an **anxiety disorder**. These are both **medical conditions** that can be **improved with treatment**, like medication and counselling.

I want to stop drinking, but when I do, I feel sick. Why?

If you experience strong cravings or withdrawal symptoms (like shaking, sweating, or vomiting) when you don't drink, you will likely need some extra medical support in order to stop drinking. You should talk to a health care provider so that you can make a plan to safely stop drinking. It can be very hard to accept that your alcohol use is problematic, but just like depression and anxiety, alcohol use disorder is a **medical condition** that can be **treated**. **People can and do get better**, and acknowledging that your alcohol use is problematic is the first step towards recovery.

How can I learn more?

If you have any questions about anxiety or depression and their connection to alcohol use, you should speak to your doctor, nurse, or counsellor. You can also find more information and resources on the META:PHI website.

www.metaphi.ca/patient-resources.html

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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.

None	Low-risk	Risky	Alcohol use disorder
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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.

