

Alcohol and Stress: What's the Connection?

Coping psychologically and emotionally with traumatic events is a challenge for everyone and many people continue to feel greater stress and anxiety in their lives after these events. Some may develop post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), an anxiety disorder brought on by exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal. Chronic stress and PTSD can trigger or exacerbate alcohol abuse problems. Previous research has shown a strong association between PTSD and alcohol consumption. The following information is provided to demonstrate why it is important not to use alcohol in response to a stressful situation or event and how to avoid using alcohol when stressed.

- ❖ Research indicates that stressful events may profoundly influence the use of alcohol.
- ❖ People may drink as a means of coping with certain stressful feelings, such as:
 - Financial problems
 - Job stress
 - Marital problems
- ❖ It is important to be aware that using alcohol in reaction to a stressful event or feelings may increase the risk of alcohol abuse.
- ❖ There are several *risk factors* for abuse of alcohol in reaction to stress:
 1. Using alcohol to “deal” with stress
 2. Experiencing the stressful event or feeling as severe, chronic, intense, or unavoidable
 3. Lacking social support or other resources for coping with stressful event or feeling
 4. Having a family history of drinking in response to stress
 5. Believing that alcohol will help to reduce stress
 6. Having unhealthy or other problematic drinking behavior preceding the stressful event or feeling
 7. Feeling helpless or having no control over the stressful event or feeling
 8. Trying to avoid or numb feelings in reaction to the stressful event

❖ Special Concerns for Recovering Alcoholics

- Among abstinent alcoholics, personally threatening, severe, and chronic life stressors may lead to alcohol relapse.
- An alcoholic may resume the use of alcohol after a lengthy period of abstinence to try to lessen the stressful feelings.
- Those most vulnerable to relapse tend to be alcoholic persons who have low levels of coping skills, self-efficacy, and social support.

❖ How to Avoid Abusing Alcohol When Stressed

- Get screened and/or evaluated for an alcohol problem, either at a National Alcohol Screening Day Site or at a local substance abuse treatment provider.
- Learn what constitutes at-risk levels of drinking:
 - For a man: >14 drinks/week or > 2 drinks /day on average
 - For a woman: > 7 drinks/week or > 1 drink/day on average
- Incorporate alternative ways of coping with stress, other than consuming alcohol:
 - ✓ Take a bath
 - ✓ Take a walk
 - ✓ Listen to relaxing music
 - ✓ Call a friend
 - ✓ Take a nap
 - ✓ Any other relaxing activities