



LET'S TALK ABOUT BOOZE

WHAT IS IT *REALLY* ADDING OR
SUBTRACTING FROM YOUR LIFE?



MOTIVATION ASSIST
POSITIVE IDEAS ON WEIGHT MANAGEMENT

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Most of us are aware that there is an alcohol acceptance culture in Ireland, steeped in denial, where binge drinking is seen as the norm, and drinking to oblivion isn't unusual. It doesn't help that the alcohol industry bombards us on a daily basis with advertising, marketing and sponsorship deals that cement the relationship between alcohol and 'having the craic' in Ireland (a particularly worrying aspect for our impressionable teens).

But let's try to be honest here about our own alcohol habit. Human nature tends to be hedonistic and pleasure-seeking; something us Irish are particularly great at (yet other Europeans seem to have just as much fun with very little alcohol – have you noticed?). So what is it exactly you get out of having a drink, or having many, many drinks? There are some benefits that cannot be denied – the number one for most is that feeling of relaxing and 'switching off' at the end of a hard day or week. But is that really just an illusion (read more to find out).

We want you to think about this question long and hard: **what's your relationship with alcohol?** Do you try to 'control' it (and are wary that you'll go overboard), or do you see it as a good thing – a way to relax with friends and loved ones? Another question to ask yourself is: how much is too much? Many of us have a sense of what an 'acceptable' level of drinking is, but it's important to have a think of what that really means for you. And how often do you drink beyond that level? We're going to take you through a list of just some of the pros and cons of alcohol. Try to make your own list and then decide if the pros outweigh the cons, or vice-versa.



THE PROS

“It helps me to relax and forget my responsibilities”

Mmmm...alcohol does have sedative qualities and appears to temporarily obliterate the never-ending list of things to do, responsibilities to attend to and stresses to overcome. But does it really help you relax? Actually, no – it contributes to anxiety (see “I feel more stressed – why?” in CONS list below). This is the big paradox central to drinking. Also, alcohol actually takes you away from yourself. It’s a big time zapper: time that we could be spending on ourselves, our loved ones, our passions or our hobbies instead gets relegated to drinking, and recovering from drinking the following day. That’s time you won’t get back.



“It helps me to forget my worries”

If that’s why you’re drinking, then you’re simply using it as a (socially acceptable) coping strategy and a numbing technique. You’re trying to block out uncomfortable feelings and, of course, numbing those feelings does seem to work in the short-term. And, when you give up alcohol, or reduce the amount you drink, you now have to face those emotions head-on, but it’s a much better strategy in the longer term. Try to change your attitude towards negative feelings; they are just part of life, so it’s much more helpful to accept them. In fact, ‘sitting with’ and accepting your emotions, instead of drinking to numb them, has been proven to be a much more effective technique for improved mental health. And, just remember, when you numb bad emotions with alcohol (or food, drugs, shopping or a chronic need to ‘stay busy’), then you also numb the good feelings – and life can take on a dreary haze of discontent. Aren’t you worth more than that?

“It helps me feel confident”

While alcohol can reduce anxiety temporarily, since it interferes with nerve signals, thereby making us more likely to take risks, speak up or act out (perhaps with regret the next day), it can also increase anxiety within just a few hours of consumption. In fact, the effects of alcohol actually place your system on high alert and, in addition to a major blood sugar enough, can be enough to trigger a major anxiety attack. This happens even with moderate amounts of alcohol, and the effects on anxiety can last into the following day...that won't help you in that work presentation or on a first date – where's that great confidence gone now? Also, as people get older (generally aged 30 and upwards) this knock-on effect on anxiety levels seems to worsen, and becomes even more pronounced as women approach menopause.



“It helps me sleep”

Many people believe a drink before bedtime helps them to sleep. They're right; in that alcohol acts like a sedative that can often help you fall asleep. But unfortunately though it's not the right type of sleep. Alcohol holds back glutamine, which keeps you awake, meaning that once you've gone to bed the body gets flooded with glutamine, keeping you awake or causing you to wake early. It often prevents you going into the deeper stages of sleep that are so essential to you waking up full of energy in the morning. One study showed that even drinking alcohol six hours before bedtime has an impact on the quality of sleep. And days of alcohol-fuelled sleep is a big disaster for intensifying feelings of stress and anxiety in the longer term.

“It helps me to connect with people”

Christenings, weddings, funerals...we Irish reinforce alcohol continually as a social lubricant. But, really, aren't we just running away from our 'real selves' when we get intoxicated? The reality is that we don't need alcohol to connect (just think of all those great, sober work conversations you've had with colleagues) and research clearly points to the threat that excessive alcohol can pose problems within romantic relationships. Also think of the effects in terms of children – how many times have you felt cranky and tired and then let loose at your kids (this can be linked to even three days after drinking as the effects take that long to leave your body)? Think about connecting with the people that really matter; do you really need alcohol to do that? Or does alcohol actually interfere with those connections?

THE CONS

“I feel more stressed – why?”

Alcohol raises the stress hormone cortisol – a hormone designed to help us prepare for threat by fighting or fleeing (the ‘fight’ or ‘flight’ hormone). It has some short-term benefits (such as feeling energized, excited and raring to go) but, if elevated in the longer term, you get the downside of long-term elevated cortisol levels (linked to high blood pressure, diabetes, increased abdominal fat, brain changes which compromise memory, depression, suicide and insomnia). That’s the game-changer for many, and the reason why many of us (particularly aged 40 and over) wake up early after a night’s drinking with a pumping chest and sweaty palms (the feeling coined years ago as ‘the fear’). The other bad news is that, although in the short-term it appears to help us de-stress, in the longer term alcohol actually lowers the serotonin (the ‘happy hormone’) in our brains – that’s a double whammy for mental health.



“I’m dehydrated after drinking”

Bloating is another frequent complaint associated with drinking too much alcohol on a regular basis – again this is linked to the fact that alcohol is dehydrating; the body retains what water it has in order to combat the diuretic nature of alcohol. Alcohol can cause also changes in the function of the kidneys and make them less able to filter your blood. In addition to filtering blood, your kidneys do many other important jobs. One of these jobs is keeping the right amount of water in your body. When alcohol dehydrates the body, the drying effect can affect the normal function of cells and organs, including the kidneys and liver. Plus dehydration can cause fatigue and lower muscle function in the longer term – *not* good news for the metabolism.

“I’m jittery and anxious”

Although it initially feels like an ‘upper’, alcohol is actually a substance that is known to interfere with our neurotransmitters, heightening anxiety in the long-term. Some people actually report increased anxiety after giving up alcohol. This can be the result of the fact that they’ve used alcohol to almost ‘mask’ or distract themselves from their true feelings and, when they take the alcohol away, it’s clear that their usual anxiety levels are actually quite high. It’s worth pointing out here that exercise is the perfect antidote to feeling jittery and anxious; it floods the system with feel-good chemicals called endorphins so it’s a brilliant strategy to combat the anxiety that might come when you reduce your reliance on alcohol to relax (a strategy that we know doesn’t actually work).



“I’m drinking myself into depression”

It is safe to say that alcohol contributes to the development of depression. Up to 40% of heavy drinkers display depression symptoms. Alcohol is known to lower levels of two crucial neurotransmitters - serotonin and norepinephrine. Adequate amounts of serotonin are necessary for stable mood and to regulate many processes such as sleep cycle, pain control, appropriate digestion, and immune system function. Low levels of norepinephrine are associated with low energy, decreased focus ability, anxiety and sleep cycle problems (no wonder alcohol is a known depressant). Just as in the case of anxiety, sometimes people drink because they think it will help alleviate their symptoms, but it only makes things worse. Instead, they need to get help for their depression and, ideally, to stop drinking for now.

“I might be damaging my liver”

You could be. Due to the high toxicity of alcohol, it has a detrimental effect on the liver, our crucial, often over-looked organ tasked with over 500 roles, including ridding the body of any waste products or poisons. And it's not just serious liver disease, such as cirrhosis (linked to a high alcohol intake over many years) that we're talking about. Fatty liver disease could affect anyone who binge drinks as it causes fat to be built up in the liver. It's shocking to learn that drinking more than eight units a day (that's four pints of lager) if you're a man and over five units a day (a couple of 175ml glasses of wine) if you're a woman - for even just two or three weeks - and you're likely to develop a fatty liver.



“Am I putting myself at risk of cancer?”

Yes. In fact, according to the World Cancer Research Fund (WCRF UK), research shows strong evidence that consuming alcoholic drinks (even at relatively low levels) increases the risk of six cancers: bowel (colorectal), breast, mouth, pharynx and larynx (mouth and throat), oesophageal (squamous cell carcinoma), liver and stomach. Not surprising then that WCRF UK's advice for cancer prevention is to not drink at all (they used to recommend to drink in moderation, if at all but, notably, in recent years the advice has hardened to 'try not to drink at all') – there's just no getting away from the hard science that alcohol is a poison to our bodies.

“Is lowering my inhibitions necessarily a good thing?”

We all know how much fun it is to ‘just let go’, yet lowered inhibitions can lead to questionable behaviour, which we often worry about the following day after binge drinking. Did we really speak to our colleague in that way? Why did we have that cigarette when smoking isn’t something we want to be doing? The list – and the excruciating guilt/embarrassment – goes on. It’s worth having a think about WHY we are so eager to go wild – what are we running away from and, if we are, is there another solution? Could we put more time and effort into relaxation or into enjoying a hobby, whether that’s something creative or sporty. It’s worth looking beyond the bottle of wine – chances are you’re looking in the wrong place.



“Does it affect my children?”

Many of us think it’s only heavy drinking and having drunken arguments at home that affects children (which, of course, both do – in a very serious way). But if you have children, you need to know that your own patterns of drinking do, according to studies, have a significant knock-on effect your child’s future alcohol patterns. If you routinely tell your kids that ‘Mummy needs her wine to relax’ or ‘Daddy’s hitting the pub as it’s Friday night’ – don’t be naïve in thinking it doesn’t rub off. Likewise, having a lie-in every Saturday or Sunday morning - and subsequently avoiding taking the kids to their GAA, soccer or dance class - should really be questioned and discussed between partners – is this what you really want for your kids?

*At Motivation, we’re quite clear with clients that alcohol **will impede weight loss** – so ideally we ask you to have none, or very little.*

That is why we haven’t listed ‘weight gain’ or ‘slow weight’ loss in the list above; we’re aware you already know this one! Not only does alcohol add ‘empty calories’ but it also increases ghrelin (the hungry hormone) the day after drinking, so staying on track can be quite the challenge!

So Is There 'Another Way'?

Well, yes, and as it happens, there seems to be a big global shift taking place, seeing people moving away from alcohol and towards other 'answers' to their stress. It's even reached our Irish, whiskey-sodden shores, meaning 'I'm not drinking tonight' is almost becoming an acceptable term.

Check out inspiring challenges, detailing people's journeys in giving up alcohol for [a few months](#), [a year](#) or [even permanently](#). Some are not giving up, but striving to drink more moderately instead (read the book *Mindful Drinking: How Cutting Down Can Change Your Life* by Rosamund Dean).

The founders of the One Year No Beer (OYNB) website, Andy Ramage and Ruari Fairbairns, are two regular guys who gave up drinking for a year because they felt that alcohol was simply holding them back. Andy says, "Every day had become a slog and some of the enjoyment was fading out of life. My world felt like one constant hangover. I was tired, anxious, just not right at all. I wasn't depressed or an alcoholic; I was just bored with the booze." Andy used mindfulness and meditation to break his alcohol habit. From that, the OYNB challenge was born. Similarly, Annie Grace (*This Naked Mind* – see above), gave up after finding that alcohol had stopped working for her as a 'coping strategy'.

Others are simply questioning their alcohol use, asking whether it's sometimes used as an unhealthy coping strategy and the recognition that sometimes it [can increase, rather than reduce, feelings of anxiety over the longer-term](#).

Thinking of Abstinence (Even Just for a While?)

Our Top Tips

If you're wondering whether 'staying dry' and avoiding alcohol will make a difference to how you feel, take note of research from London's Royal Free Hospital. They monitored over 100 men and women, who were regular drinkers, during a month of no drinking. What they found was 'substantial improvements', not only in liver function but also in the quality of the participant's sleep, which lead to feeling more rested and calmer in general.

ARE YOU READY



Sign up to a Challenge

Tell people that you're giving up for a while, and that you really need their support. Instead of saying "I'm never drinking again", you might find it easier to aim one week or one month...and then take it from there. See above for website suggestions. It also helps to focus on wellbeing and fitness at this time – so that you feel and see the physical and mental benefits almost instantly.

Keep Going Out

It's important to not cut off social ties, so keep going out but avoid drinking. Drive to the venue and, if it helps you to feel more comfortable, order a non-alcoholic beer while out. Or go to places that aren't all about the booze – the cinema or a play/stand-up comedy can provide an enjoyable experience, without the nasty hangover.



Find New Outlets

It's a good idea to focus your attention on a new area, such as getting fit (exercise classes/cycle groups/beginners golf – take your pick), learning how to cook (cookery demos or finally taking out all those good cookbooks at home) or trying something crafty (knitting/drawing/woodwork – again, the world's your oyster). You'll find you have a little more time back on your hands without drink – the added bonus: a fuller life!

Don't Get Bored

Keep yourself busy for the first few weeks. Boredom can be a major trigger, when the sudden impulse to drink is going to hit, particularly if you're used to drinking regularly. Plan and keep your diary active. Start a new challenge or hobby – sign up for a charity run or organize a hike up a local mountain with a pal.

Save that Money

You'll definitely notice the euros building up – save them and treat yourself after certain goalposts, such as the first week or the first month alcohol-free (nothing beats a good massage or reflexology appointment to reward yourself for another week down). Show your appreciation to a partner or friend who is supporting you on your journey by buying them a gift or bring them out for a lovely meal.

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It's not just *what* you eat, it's *why*