

Alcohol as Self-Medication How to Spot the Signs (Before it's Too Late)

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Specialist employee support
for life's toughest challenges

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The Covid-19
pandemic
has changed
the world in
numerous ways.

One of the most significant changes we have noted at Beyond EAP is that more employees have turned to substances like alcohol, to help them cope with life's daily demands.

When we think about all the brand-new challenges Covid-19 brought, this may not seem surprising. Suddenly, we were thrown into home-schooling our children, providing round-the-clock care for elderly loved ones, or supporting our families through grief, stress, and illness...



...all while trying to keep a roof over our heads in a new and uncertain world.

And after yet another long, hard day, nobody would blame you for downing an extra glass of wine – or two – in front of the TV.

Would they?



The Great British Drink-Off

British culture celebrates drinking, whether it's "a quick one after work" or weekend 'wine o'clock' with friends. Meanwhile, every British soap opera features an iconic local pub!

Alcohol is also a key ingredient of many social events and circles, where the ability to "handle your drink" can be particularly prized. OK, things might get a little out of hand every now and then... but so what?

Drinking alcohol isn't illegal. You can easily buy your favourite tipples from just about anywhere, and if they make you feel good when times are bad, then really, what's the problem?

During lockdown, when we couldn't see our friends and family, enjoying the drinks we would have indulged in all together might have felt like a reasonable compromise – perhaps with an extra glass or two for good measure... cheers!

But this is a habit that seems to have continued into our post-Covid world, with potentially devastating effects. A combined 2022 study from the University of Sheffield and the Institute of Alcohol Studies/Health Lumen has noted that *"changes in alcohol consumption during the pandemic are likely to lead to thousands of additional cases of disease, premature deaths and hospital admissions, costing the NHS billions."*

Alcohol can establish a routine of dependency, which is stigmatised by Britain's celebratory culture.

The result? People who need help the most often do not receive it.

When you drink alcohol, you are actually indulging in the world's oldest recreational drug. The popularity of alcohol has endured for centuries because it really does make us feel good.

That glass of cider or pint of beer alters the chemicals in your brain, which helps to block feelings of stress and anxiety. It also gently slows down your central nervous system, which creates a warm, relaxing sensation.



However, you may have noticed that these pleasant effects soon wear off, which means you must carry on drinking to keep feeling good. Over time, your highly efficient brain is trained to treat alcohol as a 'reward' during stressful times; a tonic that allows you to distance yourself from problems – whether your own, or out in the wider world.

Given the parade of serious issues the world is facing, from the cost of living crisis and wage freezes, to climate change and the war in Ukraine, is it any wonder that so many of us want to distance ourselves and relax?

But sadly, this cycle can lead to severe dependence on alcohol; one that British culture in particular is poorly equipped to recognise and support.



Spotting the signs of alcohol dependence

It's interesting that many of the employees we work with for alcohol dependency are not originally referred to Beyond EAP for that reason.

Instead, they are often referred because their behaviour caused a serious incident that cannot be ignored. For example, the employee became uncontrollably angry during a meeting, they started a fight, or they harassed a colleague.

It is only when we speak directly with these employees, or ask them to complete our self-medication questionnaire, that their dependence on alcohol comes to light. While some are aware and ashamed, others are shocked to discover that what they believed to be 'normal' drinking was in fact a coping strategy for other, wider problems in their lives.

Partly due to our internalised culture of shame around not being able to "handle your drink", many employers are reluctant to broach the subject of alcohol directly. Many more are unable to identify the – often subtle – signs of alcohol dependency, while those who do may feel uncomfortable about discussing them.

These approaches, while completely natural, can lead to employees being prevented from accessing the right support, in good time for them to effectively reverse the damages caused by alcohol dependency.

Nobody expects line managers or HR to moonlight as medical professionals.

Employers should never try to diagnose an employee's dependency on alcohol. However, awareness of the following signs could potentially ensure they can access the right support, at the right time.

- Excessive sick leave, especially on Mondays or Fridays.
- Regular absences due to 'unforeseen problems' (e.g. car trouble, family emergencies, transport delays, or urgent home repairs.)
- Frequent lateness.
- Missed deadlines, or careless work from an employee who had previously worked well.
- Excuses for incomplete work that don't add up, or seem to make sense.
- Sudden strained relationships with colleagues.
- Short-temperedness, particularly in the mornings or just after weekends.
- Excessive use of mints or mouthwash.
- An unkempt appearance.
- Reluctance to engage with line managers, or anyone with authority at work.
- A new desire to work alone.

Clearly, if the employee smells of alcohol, or there are obviously worrying physical signs such as staggering or drowsiness, immediate action must be taken.



An open and honest conversation could be life-changing

Creating a safe, confidential space for an employee to talk freely means you may be able to discover **why** they may have turned to alcohol as a coping mechanism.

From there, you could provide access to specific services, such as counselling, or make adjustments to their work routine that allows appropriate time and space for recovery.

Most importantly, your employee will know that they have your support.

How we work with alcohol dependency at Beyond EAP

Our specialist team works to build resilience in employees who have turned to alcohol, as well as other forms of self-medication like drugs, gambling, and self-harm.

We have designed a number of specific resources, including questionnaires and informative leaflets, that help us get to the root of their relationship with alcohol. We can then gently discuss next steps with the employee, arming them with knowledge and support that means they are able to make good decisions.

For the record, we certainly don't believe that people shouldn't drink at all (unless in situations where doing so would be harmful or dangerous.) Our approach is simply about instilling employees with healthy autonomy: enjoying the pleasures of alcohol whilst knowing how and when to stop.

You can find out more about how we work, and view some of our resources, by visiting our website.

If you are concerned about a particular employee, please call us to arrange a confidential discussion.



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