

The 'Cutting Back on Drinking' New Year's Resolution

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In recent years, there has been a growing trend towards embracing a lifestyle of moderation and mindful consumption, particularly when it comes to alcohol. Many individuals are finding themselves drawn to the concept of "cutting back" on their drinking, driven by a desire to lead a healthier, more balanced life. Concerns about physical health and a deeper exploration of personal habits and behaviors fuel this shift.

"Sober Curious" is a movement gaining traction worldwide, encouraging individuals to examine their relationship with alcohol and consider the benefits of sobriety or reduced consumption. It's not about labeling oneself as an alcoholic or committing to a lifetime of abstinence but rather about questioning societal norms around drinking and exploring alternative ways of socializing and pursuing contentment.

Whether motivated by health concerns, a desire to improve mental clarity, or simply curiosity about what life without alcohol could look like, more people are seeking to understand the role of alcohol in their lives and make informed choices.

Suppose your New Year's resolution to reduce your drinking does not stem from a "sober curious" mindset that motivates you to seek a healthier, more balanced life. If, instead, you believe you may have an alcohol use disorder and are attempting to eliminate problems caused by your drinking, your drinking may be severe enough to warrant seeking professional help.

People want to believe that they have a "little" drinking problem instead of acknowledging that their alcohol use issue has risen to the level of being

diagnosed as an "Alcohol Use Disorder." Most people believe they can fix it without professional help. Before giving up alcohol, most people try to regain control over their use by avoiding the friends they partied with, not going to the bars, or changing up the kinds of alcohol they use. For people without a substance use disorder, some of these techniques may have some success.

However, impaired control is a core feature of alcohol use disorder, and defense mechanisms often convince individuals questioning their "use" that they have not truly lost control. Defenses tell that person "the problem" is anything but the chemical. People can be very creative in denying to themselves that their substance use is "the problem" rather than "the solution." Individuals use defense mechanisms to maintain or restore emotional comfort while continuing to drink despite being aware of the problems it causes. It is painful to know the harm you are causing your life with certain behaviors and to feel unable to stop doing it.

How do you know if you have an alcohol use disorder, and what does that mean? We define an alcohol use disorder along a continuum of problems associated with it. The DSM-5TR uses eleven items in the four categories of diagnostic criteria -- a) impaired control, b) social impairment, c) risky use, and d) pharmacologic effects (i.e., tolerance and withdrawal.) Experiencing two or more of these impairment symptoms indicates a substance use disorder. Experiencing six or more criteria indicates a "severe disorder." See [Understanding Addiction: The Basics](#) on this site for more information about diagnostic criteria.

You may have noticed that your drinking has involved a change in priorities, where your focus has shifted more and more to drinking. Things previously important are abandoned or neglected in favor of drinking. Family members may know that there is a problem and make statements like, "Your drinking is more important than me or the kids." Part of the defining features of substance use disorder is the fact that drinking persists despite recurrent adverse consequences (e.g., family arguments, DUI, bar fights, falls, accidents, etc.) and unsuccessful attempts to quit, or "cut back."

Loss of control involves drinking in ways, for lengths of time, and in quantities different from what was initially intended, often resulting in undesirable outcomes. "Loss of control" does not have to occur each time a person uses it to be considered "Impaired control." You may have tried little experiments to prove that your drinking is not a problem. When your experiments result in a return to drinking in the same concerning manner, you may need some help.

So, if your New Year's resolution this year is to "cut back" on your drinking or drug use, do yourself a favor and seek professional assistance to determine if you have a substance use disorder and what level of problem you are dealing with. If you identify with the descriptions of alcohol use disorder in this article, let a professional guide your self-improvement efforts this year. The probability that you will be successful this time will improve dramatically. **Note: This article has been revised and edited from its original version, which was previously published in 2011 on this site. The content has been updated for contemporary language, clarity and accuracy.**

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