Avoiding High-Risk Drinking

What is low-risk drinking?

- Low-risk drinking is having no more than two drinks a day and on no more than five days each week. Medical experts agree that drinking more than this can lead to serious medical and other life problems.
- Everyone should try to keep their drinking at the low-risk level. If you are above this level then you are a high-risk drinker.

If you are a high-risk drinker

You may be interested in stopping or cutting down on your alcohol intake to low-risk levels. Here is information about how to do it

What is a “standard” drink?

- People often drink more than they should because they don’t know how a “standard” drink is measured. A standard drink is:
  - One 12 ounce beer (a 6 pack is 6 drinks!)
  - One glass of wine (5 ounces) (a bottle of wine is 5 drinks!)
  - One “shot” (1.5 ounces) of hard liquor
- The first step is to learn how to know a standard drink so you can keep track of how much you are drinking.

How do I cut down my drinking?

- Many people reduce or stop drinking on their own, but it can help a lot to get a friend, relative, or health provider to help you work out a plan and stick to it. We strongly recommend getting somebody to help you, but if you aren’t able to get somebody else to help, then work out a plan for yourself.
- We provide a “Cutting Down Plan” worksheet for you. More about that later.

What do I do now?

- Ask yourself these questions:
  - How will I benefit if I cut down on my drinking?
  - How will my life improve?

Medical experts agree that low-risk drinking has these good benefits.

Check off at least three that seem to be the best reasons for you to cut down your drinking.

☐ Live longer—probably between 5-10 years longer
☐ Sleep better
☐ Be happier
☐ Save a lot of money
☐ Improve my relationships
☐ Stay younger for longer
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☐ Achieve more in my life
☐ Live to an old age without damage to my brain
☐ Be better at my job
☐ Feel less depressed and much less likely (6 times less) to commit suicide
☐ Less likely to die of a heart problem or cancer
☐ Less likely to die in a fire or by drowning
☐ Other people will look up to me
☐ Less likely to get into trouble with the police
☐ Less likely to die (12 times less) of liver problems
☐ Less likely to die (3 times less) in a car accident
☐ FOR MEN: Sexual performance will improve
☐ FOR WOMEN: Less likely to have an unplanned pregnancy
☐ FOR WOMEN: Less likely that I will damage an unborn child

Now make a note of these good reasons for cutting down on your drinking in the spaces provided in the “Cutting Down Plan”.

Learning About Your “Triggers”

- The things we do (that is, our behaviors) don’t just happen for no reason at all. Drinking alcohol is a behavior, just like any other behavior, and it is more likely to happen in certain situations.
- These situations are what we call “triggers” because they happen just before we take a drink and help to get it started.

What are your Triggers for drinking?

Think about the last time you were a High-Risk drinker.

- **People**
  Think about the people you are with when you drink. Why might it be difficult to make a different choice in that situation? Are any of these things true for you?
  - You are attracted to that person
  - You do not want the person to criticize or reject you
  - You want the person to like you
  - You are afraid of the person
  - Something else?

- **Feelings and Moods**
  Different feelings can have a powerful effect on the choices we make. Strong feelings are the most powerful, like feeling sad, lonely, nervous, bored, unsure of yourself, and so on. Imagine if you are feeling depressed and like you had nothing to lose. Can you see how that might have a strong effect on the choices you make?

- **Places**
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Think of how you act when at church or a restaurant. Now compare that to how you act when you are at a football game, a bar, or New Year’s Eve party. Pretty different, right? So the places we go can have a powerful effect on what we do and how we act.

Putting it all together

Let’s say you are in the habit of going to a bar after work (the place). Your job is stressful and demanding and you feel like you deserve to relax after a long day at work (the feelings). On top of that, some of your co-workers often go there as well, and you are worried about fitting in with them (the people). Can you see how this combination of “triggers” could have a strong influence on you taking a drink?

Sometimes it is possible to avoid triggers. For example, instead of going to the bar you might choose to go to the gym or to go home. If you have trouble not drinking around certain people you might try hanging around with people who don’t drink for a while, until you feel more confident in your ability to refuse a drink if offered. If you can’t avoid a trigger, like feeling stressed for example, you might experiment with other ways to handle that feeling, like taking a warm relaxing bath after work or taking a yoga class.

Sometimes just becoming aware of the triggers prepares you to handle them differently. For example, if the popular gathering place after work is at the bar, and you know that you are at risk for drinking when at a bar you can order a non-alcoholic beverage as soon as you arrive and make a commitment to yourself that you will leave after finishing the beverage.

The bottom line is that the more you know about your triggers the better prepared you will be to either avoid these triggers or to manage them better. Being prepared for triggers and having a plan for how to deal with them gives you a much better chance of not using alcohol.

Next Steps

- Choose four “At-Risk” situations (specific places, people, feelings, for example) that give you the most trouble with limiting your drinking and write them down in the section for this in your “Cutting Down Plan.”
- The next step is to figure out ways to drink at Low-Risk levels in those situations.
- Using the examples above as a guide, think of two ways to avoid or cope with each of your At-Risk situations. Record these in the sections provided in your “Cutting Down Plan.”
- One of the best ways to encourage yourself to drink at Low-Risk levels is by having friends who drink at or below Low-Risk levels. Think of as many ways as you can of putting yourself in those situations. Here are some ideas:
  - Join a club
  - Help at your Church
  - Invite people home
  - Visit relatives more
  - Volunteer
  - Record these in the section provided in your “Cutting Down Plan.”

Dealing with boredom
Many people drink when they feel bored. Think of as many things as you can that might hold your interest and that you might find enjoyable.

Here are some ideas:
- Sports
- Games
- Going for a walk
- Hobbies
- Going to the park
- Talking on the phone

Write down the two activities that you choose in your Cutting Down Plan.

How to remember your plan
- Save your Cutting Down Plan and go over it each day, and whenever you think you will face a difficult drinking situation.
- If you have a helper, talk with them about your progress every day at first, and then a few times each week as you have more success sticking with it.
- Remind yourself that every time you are tempted to drink and you resist, you are making progress on breaking the habit.
- Whenever you have a strong urge to drink, think of it as like having a sore throat. It will pass (usually within just a few minutes) but you just need to put up with a little discomfort for a bit.
- Finally, nobody is perfect. People who successfully stop drinking or bring it down to low-risk levels, have had bad days when they “slip up.” If this happens to you, DON’T GIVE IN! It’s just ONE slip! Start again. Things will get easier with time.

Adapted from:
“Cutting Down Plan” Worksheet

My reasons for cutting down or stopping drinking
1. _____________________________________________________________
2. _____________________________________________________________
3. _____________________________________________________________

At Risk Situation 1
1. _____________________________________________________________
2. _____________________________________________________________

Ways of coping:
1. _____________________________________________________________
2. _____________________________________________________________

At Risk Situation 2
1. _____________________________________________________________
2. _____________________________________________________________

Ways of coping:
1. _____________________________________________________________
2. _____________________________________________________________

At Risk Situation 3
1. _____________________________________________________________
2. _____________________________________________________________

Ways of coping:
1. _____________________________________________________________
2. _____________________________________________________________

At Risk Situation 4
1. _____________________________________________________________
2. _____________________________________________________________

Ways of coping:
1. _____________________________________________________________
2. _____________________________________________________________

Ways of meeting others who don’t drink or do so within low-risk limits
1. _____________________________________________________________
2. _____________________________________________________________

Ways to avoid boredom to try
1. _____________________________________________________________
2. _____________________________________________________________

How to remember your plan
1. _____________________________________________________________
2. _____________________________________________________________
3. _____________________________________________________________