

FEATURE



Glass half EMPTY?

Many of us pour a glass of wine to help us relax when we feel stressed. But are we doing ourselves more harm than good?

Words: **Veronica Walsh**

Let me preface this article by telling you that I adore a glass of wine, and I am not suggesting that adults shouldn't choose to have a drink at home. What I am suggesting is that we have a think about what this behavioural choice is actually doing to us.

Is it, as many of us think, harmlessly de-stressing us and improving our lives? For some of us, perhaps. For others, not so much.

Many people use alcohol to manage and relieve stress. Studies say many of us drink to cope with unemployment, financial problems, job problems, loneliness, or relationship and family problems. And the bigger the stressor, the more likely it is that we will have a regular alcohol habit.

When we do this, we are basically self-medicating with something which the HSE describes as "a legal sedative drug which changes the way we feel". But is regular self-medication with alcohol a negative or positive stress management technique?

If you suffer from an actual stress disorder, it's likely that you have regular low moods, are often tired, and feel a bit shaky a lot of the time. All of this makes it very attractive to use the harmless occasional glass of wine to feel good.

But is it really an occasional glass, or something else? Is it really two, three or four glasses, most nights of the week? If it is, then those low moods, tiredness and shakiness may in fact be due to hangovers that you are either confusing with anxiety or depression, or that are exacerbating stress, anxiety or depression.

Regular alcohol consumption can trigger the body to produce more stress hormones, most notably cortisol, the so-called 'fight-or-flight' hormone. Alcohol directly affects many brain chemicals that signal the adrenal glands to produce and secrete cortisol. High levels of intoxication may be interpreted as general 'stress', which could stimulate cortisol release.

What does cortisol do? It shuts down the digestive and immune systems, it deposits fat around our middles, it accelerates ageing and it suppresses reproduction ability, among other undesirable things.

According to the World Health Organisation, evidence exists to show alcohol can contribute to depression. The weekly recommended units for women are 14, while it's 21 for men. A unit is classed as a small glass of wine

(125ml), so if you are using bigger glasses, you could be taking in significantly more units than you think.

Alcohol contains no nutrients, just loads of empty calories, and impairs the absorption of the important vitamins A, E and D.

It can cause irrational thinking and negative behaviour, and let's face it, relationships are tough enough to navigate without someone being regularly quick to anger, or just generally having a negative outlook and disposition.

These feelings and behaviours are often explained away by stress, anxiety or depression, but could it be the alcohol? You won't know unless you can measure results and compare how you feel, behave and communicate on a string of alcohol-free days against the wine days.

Regular drinkers are less likely to use positive coping strategies for stress than light or non-drinkers. In fact, regular drinkers often don't problem-solve at all – they just mask and escape (using avoidant behaviour). So stressors are not addressed, but are left to fester and grow.

Far from being a stress-reliever and life-enhancer, regular alcohol consumption can be totally self-sabotaging. Ask yourself: can you get through a week without any alcohol? A month? How does the thought make you feel?

If it distresses you, or seems unthinkable, then maybe you are using alcohol in a damaging way, mistaking it as a useful stress management tool, or as something you absolutely must have unless life is to be awful and unbearable. But as experts tell us, that is counter-productive.

Consider the words of Enoch Gordis, director of the US National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism: "Drinking alcohol produces physiological stress, that is, some of the body's responses to alcohol are similar to its responses to other stressors. Yet, individuals also drink to relieve stress. Why people should engage in an activity that produces effects similar to those they are trying to relieve is a paradox that we do not yet understand."

"One hypothesis is that stress responses are not exclusively unpleasant; the arousal associated with stress itself may be rewarding. This might explain, for example, compulsive gambling or repeated participation in 'thrill-seeking' activities. Current studies may illuminate genetic variations in the physiological response to stress that are important in drinking or other activities with the potential to become addictive."

What do we do about the habit if it's a problem? Habits are really hard to break, but there are some practical and immediate steps you can take.

- Buy low-alcohol wine, widely available in Ireland – you will still have the comforting routine of opening the bottle of wine and sipping.
- Make sure you're using small 125ml glasses.
- Dilute your wine with a mixer – make a spritzer

with white wine and a large percentage of sparkling water, or make a tinto de verano by adding two thirds lemonade and ice to red wine.

● Change your drink. Quit the wine, and instead have a small measure of gin and lots of tonic.

● Make sure you have some alcohol free days a week – it's easiest to make these the evenings when you have something to do and somewhere to go. (Not the pub, obviously!). Don't give yourself a medal and bake yourself a cake for doing this though, and don't use it as a reason to reward yourself with a whole bottle the next night. This kind of skewed logic is common, so fight it with rational, evidence-based logic. And don't forget to use these alcohol-free days to observe any changes in the next day's moods or energy as compared to the drinking days.

● Choose to do something else with your evening. Go for a walk, go for a drive, get a hobby, take a night class, visit people. Even if you feel wrecked, getting out will make you feel good.

If we accept that self-medication with alcohol is a negative stress-management technique, here are some positive alternatives.

We can arrest stress hormones by producing relaxation hormones instead. So what truly makes you relax? A bath? Yoga? Mindfulness? A great book? Music? A drive? Strolling on the beach? Going to a movie? Make a list, and do these relaxing activities often.

We can also stem the release of stress hormones with exercise. This is key to our wellbeing, and it doesn't need to involve a gym. Make walking part of your life; it will become a natural and enjoyable routine if you persevere and get in the habit.

If you don't want to be trapped with your own head of buzzing thoughts, then download your favourite radio talk shows from iTunes onto your smartphone, or bring a walkman. Think of other ways of keeping your body moving (take the stairs, do some vigorous housework or DIY, walk to a local market and back).

Learn breathing exercises – the fight-or-flight stress physiology overloads us on oxygen, so learning to control our breathing can help our bodies return to balance more quickly.

Our diet can also have a great effect on improving our health and mood, so investigate good foods and get them into your daily diet. Moderate or dump other mood-changers like nicotine or caffeine, as it's unlikely that they're improving your life.

It's important to state that anyone who feels they have an unmanageable problem with alcohol should seek professional help. Visit your GP for advice, and call a local resource centre; alcoholireland.ie is a good resource.

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