Many people turn to alcohol or other substances to help them "self-medicate" stress and trauma. While some people use substances recreationally, those that use it for self-medication are more likely to become dependent on that substance. As many as 50% of people with a diagnosable mental health condition (e.g., depression, anxiety, PTSD) are thought to be also affected by addiction.

It's extremely common for first responders to develop co-occurring mental health and substance use disorders. Rates of binge drinking and heavy alcohol consumption are higher among first responders than the general population. There are multiple social factors contributing to the high rates of hazardous alcohol consumption among first responders, including acts of camaraderie, peer support, and station culture. A number of responders additionally report using alcohol as a means of managing the stress of emergency calls and for winding down afterwards.

What is "normal"?

The APA defines excessive drinking (on a single occasion) as

Women:
- More than 4 drinks on a single occasion or
- 8 drinks over the course of the week

Men:
- More than 5 drinks on a single occasion
- 15 drinks over the course of the week

Problem Drinking vs. Alcoholism

People with alcoholism are addicted to alcohol- physically and mentally dependent on it. It's hard not to drink and that's typically a daily struggle. Sobriety is achievable, but often relapse will occur after just one drink, no matter how long a person has been sober.

Problem drinkers are not physically dependent on alcohol. They can go days, week, or months without drinking, if they want to. If they abstain, they will not have detox symptoms. They may drink a lot, or they may drink occasionally. The issue problem drinkers have is that when they do drink, it causes an issue in their life or in the life of someone they know (like a spouse or family member). They may say and do things that hurt others or themselves. Drinking is not a problem for these individuals, but it does create problems in their lives.

Has my drinking become a habit?

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You should be concerned if you regularly use alcohol to:

- Relax, relieve anxiety, or go to sleep.
- Be more comfortable in social situations.
- Avoid thinking about sad or unpleasant things.
- Socialize with other regular drinkers.

Has drinking alcohol become a problem for me?

Ask yourself the following questions:

- Have you felt that you should cut down on your drinking?
- Do you feel annoyed when people make comments to you about your drinking?
- Do you feel guilty about your drinking?
- Do you ever need a drink in the morning to get yourself going or to get rid of a hangover?

If you answer "yes" to just one of these questions you may have a problem. If you answer "yes" to more than one of these questions, it is highly likely that you have a drinking problem.

Other signs that your drinking has become a problem include:

- Worrying about having enough alcohol to last through an evening or a weekend.
- Hiding alcohol/ buying it at different stores so no one will know how much you are drinking.
- Switching from one kind of drink to another to keep from drinking too much.
- Trying to get "extra" drinks at a social event or sneaking drinks
- Failing to do what you should at work or at home because of drinking.
- Not being able to remember what happened while you were drinking.
- Not being able to stop drinking once you start.
- Hurting someone else as a result of your drinking.

When combined with the wrong environmental conditions and the introduction of the substance, it can lead more easily to addiction. Addiction to substances has biological and/or genetic roots. One doesn't decide to become addicted, and it's not about making choices or lack of will power. Addiction affects just about anyone; a person's profession, income, education, race or family makeup or spirituality has nothing to do with it.

If you think you might have a problem, don't wait until things get worse. Get yourself checked out. There are ways to support your body and mind in being healthier.

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