

Toolbox Talk

Alcohol - When Switching Off
Becomes a Habit



Time: 15 minutes

Objective: To help workers recognise when drinking is starting to become their main way of switching off or coping with pressure, understand how alcohol can affect work and life and encourage people to make changes or seek support early if they need it.

For a lot of people, having a drink after work is completely normal. You finish a long day, get home or back to the hotel, open a beer or pour a drink and finally feel like the working day is over. There's nothing unusual about that. The question is what happens when that drink stops being something you choose and starts feeling like something you need. Maybe one drink becomes two or three. Maybe you're reaching for alcohol every evening because it's the quickest way to switch your head off, get to sleep or forget about whatever happened during the day. That change can happen slowly, which is why it isn't always easy to notice.

Why It Matters

Construction can create an environment where drinking becomes part of the routine. Long hours, physical work, travelling, staying away from home, pressure to meet deadlines and the general stress of the job can leave people looking for a way to unwind. If you're staying in digs or hotels with the same group every week, going to the pub can also become part of the social side of working away. Alcohol can feel like it helps in the moment. It can make you feel more relaxed or help you stop thinking about work for a while. The problem is when it becomes the only way you know how to switch off. You might start drinking because you're stressed, lonely, angry, bored or struggling to sleep rather than because you actually fancy a drink. What happens outside work can also follow us back onto site. Drinking heavily the night before can affect sleep, concentration, reaction times, mood and decision-making the next day, even if you don't feel drunk when you arrive. In an industry where we drive, operate machinery, work at height and use power tools, being properly switched on matters.



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Signs To Look Out For

There's no single point where someone's drinking suddenly becomes a problem. It's often more useful to notice whether the relationship with alcohol is changing. You might find you're drinking more often than you used to or needing more to get the same feeling of relaxation. Maybe you've started drinking earlier in the evening, drinking alone more regularly or automatically picking something up on the way home without really thinking about it. You may tell yourself you're only having a couple but regularly end up drinking more than you planned. You might wake up feeling rough, sleep badly or notice you're more tired and irritable the following day. Perhaps you've tried cutting down and found it more difficult than you expected. Another sign can be the reason you're drinking. There's a difference between enjoying a drink and feeling like you can't relax, sleep or deal with a difficult day without one. You may notice changes in someone else too. Perhaps they're regularly turning up looking hungover, talking about drinking every night or becoming unusually quiet, irritable or unreliable. That doesn't mean it's our job to label them or tell them they have a problem. It might simply be a reason to ask how they're doing.

What Can Help

The first thing is to be honest with yourself about why you're drinking. Before opening that first drink, ask yourself whether you actually want it or whether it's simply become part of the routine. Even noticing the difference can tell you quite a lot. Try changing the pattern occasionally. Have a few alcohol-free evenings during the week, swap your usual drink for something else or find another way to mark the end of the working day. That might be going for a walk, having a shower, exercising, cooking something, calling someone at home or spending half an hour doing something that gives your head a chance to slow down.



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If you're working away, be especially careful of boredom becoming drinking time. Going to the pub every night can easily become the default when there's nothing else to do. Suggest getting some food, finding a gym, going for a walk or simply doing something different once or twice during the week. It can also help to notice what you're trying to escape from. If you're drinking because work is constantly on your mind, because you're struggling at home or because you're feeling lonely, alcohol might temporarily quieten those thoughts without actually dealing with what's causing them. If you're worried about how much you're drinking, speak to someone. That might be your GP, a support service, a counsellor or simply someone you trust. You don't have to wait until alcohol has damaged your health, relationships or job before asking for help. Making a change earlier is usually much easier than waiting until drinking has become deeply embedded in your routine.

Discussion Questions

- Why do you think drinking can easily become part of the routine in construction?
- What might tell someone that they're drinking to cope rather than simply because they enjoy it?
- What other ways can we switch off after a difficult working day?

Takeaway Message

This isn't about saying nobody should drink. It's about understanding your own relationship with alcohol and noticing when something that started as a way to relax is becoming the main way you cope. If you can still choose whether you drink, how much you drink and when you drink, you're making the decision. If alcohol starts making those decisions for you, that's worth paying attention to. You don't need to wait for things to become serious before doing something about it.



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Action

Over the next week, simply pay attention to your routine. Notice when you drink, how much you're drinking and, most importantly, why you're reaching for it and if a workmate tells you they're worried about their drinking, don't take the mick or judge them. Listen to what they're saying. Admitting that something is starting to get out of control can be difficult enough without worrying about how everyone else will react.



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