

A scientific look at de-stressing/self medicating with alcohol (drinking at home):

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Let me preface this post by telling you that I **adore a glass of wine**, and I'm not suggesting adults shouldn't choose to have a glass of wine at home – we're just going to have an academic look at the science of this particular habit. It's interesting – and the purpose of the post is so that we can have a think about whether this behavioural choice is actually doing what we think it is (harmlessly de-stressing and improving life).

For some perhaps. For others, not so much.

Do you leave behind the stress of the day, signalling to your mind and body that it's 'evening and time to relax', by opening a bottle of wine and pouring a glass?

Somehow drinking at home has become a regular unremarkable event in recent years. It even appears sophisticated and cool. They do it in movies don't they? We're Europeans now aren't we? Hmm, but are we having a glass of wine simply to enhance a meal and it's flavours? Or are we quite deliberately using it to de-stress? *'Both!'* shout many. Okay, whichever, this post is going to give you some information so that you can step back and consider if it's a useful de-stressor for you, or something you might want to change.



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 – hello 2012!! And the bigger the stressor, the more likely we will have a regular alcohol habit. No judgement here, it is what it is – but let's face it, when we do this, we are basically self-medicating with a drug. The HSE define alcohol as: 'A legal sedative drug which changes the way we feel'. This post will consider whether regular

self-medication with alcohol is 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, right? Which makes it very attractive to use the harmless occasional glass of wine to feel good? Okay... here are several things for you to have a think about:

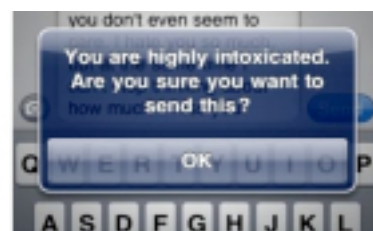
- take an honest look at your routines, and see if it's really an occasional 'glass', or something else. We often refer to the habit as 'an occasional glass of wine', when in fact it's often most nights, and two or three or four glasses. Sipping while watching TV or reading... And hey, if it's a Thursday or Friday or Saturday – sure we're not out, and if we were out we'd be drinking, right? So it stands to reason we can have the whole bottle at home guilt free, right? Note – those low moods and your tiredness and shakiness may in fact be due to hangovers

that you are either confusing with anxiety or depression, or that are exacerbating stress and anxiety or depression. How will you know unless you can test and compare how you feel over an alcohol free period of time?

- bad news – regular alcohol use has the effect of getting the body to produce MORE stress hormones. More! Most notably cortisol (the ‘death hormone’, not to freak you out or anything). The science bit: “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 when active, it deposits fat around our middles, and it accelerates aging, and suppresses reproduction ability... among other undesirable things, but that’s enough to be going on with.
- according to the World Health Organisation, evidence exists to show alcohol can contribute to depression.
- the weekly [recommended units](#) for women are 14, and 21 for men. A unit is classed as a SMALL glass of wine (125ml), with one bottle of wine holding 7 units. Heads up: you may use bigger than 125ml glasses, consuming 1.5 or 2 units at a time, but feel virtuous by counting the quantity of glasses? Check yours out.
- alcohol contains no nutrients, just loads of empty calories. The only ‘low calorie wines’ are very low alcohol wines (the Weight Watchers wines for instance, or as a friend puts it ‘the pretendy wines’). I’ve spoken to two sommeliers, who gave me lists of what they regarded as low alcohol wines, but the differences to ‘normal’ wines were negligible, so I’m not bothered passing them on here. Oh, and alcohol impairs absorption of the important vitamins A, E, and D.
- alcohol can cause irrational thinking and negative behaviours, and relationships are tough enough to navigate without being regularly quick to anger or sulking or just generally having a negative outlook and disposition, or being, well, annoying. These feelings and behaviours are often explained away by stress or anxiety or depression, but, could it be the alcohol? Again, you won’t know unless you can measure results and compare how you feel and 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, they’re left to fester and grow.
- ah, I think I’ve given you enough bad news to be going on with....

No, wait. Did I mention it can make us say things we don’t mean? And **drunk text**? (For drunk texting, also read drunk-: tweeting, facebooking, emailing, calling, booty-calling, etc.)

So – all things considered, far from being a stress reliever and life enhancer, regular alcohol consumption can be totally self sabotaging. *Please don’t kill the messenger!*



Sometimes we don’t like what we learn. I had a conversation about this topic at lunch recently with a group of fabulous intelligent women of varying ages, with varying high flying careers, and most with young families – the subject that brought it up was that they were constantly feeling wrecked with stress, and ‘thank God for their wine at night’. Go me! ... off I went babbling out my interesting facts ‘Ladies, let’s consider the idea that the cause of your wreckedness may sometimes be because of your wine, is it

possible you're generally hungover a bit?...'. Cue aghast faces – they basically told me to stop raining on their parade, and one of them put her fingers in her ears and loudly sang 'lalalalalala, I CAN'T HEAR YOU', while the others hooted and approved – with one saying, 'Veronica, you'll take my wine out of my cold dead hand. Jesus, leave me with something won't you?'. It was funny, and we laughed and moved on, but not before I helpfully told them that they couldn't unhear what I'd said bless them, and that they were now stuck with that idea in their heads. Information is power.

We adults make our decisions based on our information at the time,

and we'd like to think we're being smart and making our life as good as it can be, as opposed to deliberate sabotage – so at least let's be informed, *always be learning!* – so that we can make decisions and tweaks and changes along the road that are life enhancing.

"Actually, I think I'm fine!" – many of you reading this post have a pleasant and moderate and manageable occasional habit, and that's great. The information is still useful in understanding *others* in our lives though, and it can be *preventative* to stop us falling into the habit.



"Uh-oh, this sounds like me!" – for others: do you suspect that you are a regular self-medicator, and that it's a self sabotaging behaviour? **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 use alcohol in a damaging way – mistaking it as a useful stress management tool, mistaking it as something you absolutely must have or else life is awful and unbearable.

Let the experts have a chat with you:



Andrew McCulloch, Chief Executive of the UK Mental Health Foundation, said: "... research confirms our worries that people are drinking to cope with emotions and situations they can't otherwise manage, to deal with feelings of anxiety and depression."

Enoch Gordis MD, Director of the US National Inst on Alcohol Abuse (NIAAA), said: 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!

Well, obviously I'm going to recommend that you use this free resource self help blog here to learn how to examine and change destructive thinking and feeling and behaviour with CBT!

But in the meantime, here are some very practical and immediate tips:

Habit is habit,
and not to be flung
out of the window
by any man, but
coaxed downstairs
a step at a time.
MARK TWAIN

Play with tweaking and changing the habit:

It may have become a Pavlovian classic conditioning, which would make it really uncomfortable to stop, which pretty much means you won't do it (human beings will do anything to avoid discomfort!) – so instead of an immediate abrupt cessation, just play with the routine so that you appear to still have it as your crutch, but are decreasing the alcohol intake by one or more of the following options on occasional nights (and I'm sure you can come up with your ideas too):

- Buy low alcohol (and low calorie) wine like the Weight Watchers one – 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 – spritzer white wine with a large percentage of sparkling water, or make a 'tinto de verano' by adding two thirds sprite and ice to red wine. Some people even mix pepsi (sacrilege! non!).
- Change your drink. Quit the wine, have a small measure of gin and lots of tonic instead for instance. Or low alcohol 'anything'.
- 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. (No, 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 – fight it with rational evidence based logic! And don't forget to use these alcohol free days to observe any changes in next days moods or energy as compared to the wine days.
- If you psychologically associate other habits with the wine, then work on changing them, do things differently, or tolerate the discomfort of missing the wine while doing them and telling yourself 'yes this is uncomfortable, but it's only because of my learned behaviour, I can take it, it's not 'unbearable', and it will get easier each time until it doesn't bother me at all. I am evolving!' – make your own statement.
- Choose to do something else with your evening, go for a walk, go for a drive, get a hobby, take a nightclass, visit people, DO something in the hours before bedtime! Even if you feel wrecked, mostly getting out makes us feel good. Try it.
- Drink flavoured teas instead. (No, I'm not joking.) Develop other habits.

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

- We can arrest the 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 them, often. Work around the restrictions your circumstances might mean – compromise time for yourself with your partner, set routines for when the kids have gone to bed – join meetup.com if you're lonely (no, it's nothing to do with dating, it's a social network site, incredibly interesting, and if you feel a stigma about using it, well get over it! We're talking about your happiness here, we've no time to worry about others perception of us. Also, no need to tell them is there?).
- We can also stem the release of stress hormones with exercise – this is key to our well-being – key! and it doesn't need to be a gym. For most it is brisk walking! Make walking part of your life, change your habits with the car or bus, walk occasionally instead. Walking 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, not the elevator.. walk up the escalator, do some vigorous housework or DIY, walk to a local market and back and reward yourself with a tasty meal afterwards.. and so on – make your own list).
- Learn breathing exercises, 'fight or flight' stress physiology overloads us on oxygen – learning to control our breathing can help our bodies return to balance more quickly.
- Our diet can have a great effect on improving our health and mood. Investigate good foods (and do the known basics, replace your white carbs with brown whenever you can! Dump the habit of white rice and potatoes and bread and pasta, and replace with the brown/wholewheat equivalents. The idea they don't taste as nice is bunkum really, as we get our flavours from the sauces and meats. Again, persevere and make it a thing you do – it will gradually become something you couldn't imagine NOT doing! (Remember we all had Tefals and deep fried chips? Most of us couldn't imagine doing that now. Habits can be changed.)
- Moderate or dump other mood changers – nicotine, caffeine, narcotics, dope, whatever. It's highly unlikely they're improving your life. Just do your best....

Note for those of you who think you have an unmanageable problem with alcohol, it may be time to seek professional help. Visit your GP for advice, and call a local resource centre. In Ireland get information at <http://alcoholireland.ie/get-help/>

Stress Reduction Kit



Directions:
1. Place kit on FIRM surface.
2. Follow directions in circle of kit.
3. Repeat step 2 as necessary, or until unconscious.
4. If unconscious, cease stress reduction activity.



Oh, did this post seem skewed towards women? Yeah – it kind of is, most of my clients are women, and this is one of the big issues. Sorry! Here's a picture of a man drinking wine to compensate. And, it's the same difference – use the info to fit your situation.

**Okay, I think I'm done. Sorry everybody!!
(I'm not really).**