

CHANGE YOUR DRINKING HABITS

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Results from a recent national survey: almost a third of adult Americans have had a problem with **alcohol abuse** or **alcohol dependence** at some point in their lives. The average age for drinking problems to develop is 22, yet there's a lag of about 10 years before these individuals seek help – and then only about 30% of them receive treatment (10% of the adult population).

What this data tells me is that first, there are a lot of people out there with drinking problems, especially within the 18 – 30 age group. (This is probably not news to many of you!) Second, most of these folks either don't think they have a problem, or don't go into rehab or AA, at least not until things get a lot worse. But I wonder about the 20% or so of people who report alcohol problems, yet apparently don't ever get help: since we know there aren't that many actual alcoholics out there, it suggests that most of these folks resolved their problem on their own.

Indeed, in my experience, *most people who drink too much or have problems related to drinking resolve them by learning to moderate their drinking*. For some, it only takes one time to learn the lesson, especially if there's a negative consequence that follows, like getting a DUI. Others may experience a lot of alcohol-related problems before deciding to change their drinking behavior.

In my practice I see many adults who have unhealthy habits around alcohol use – for example, drinking right before bedtime, or gulping their drinks, or consuming large quantities (whether a nightly bottle of wine, or a 12-pack of beer every weekend). While they don't view themselves as having a drinking problem, they may complain of other problems – like insomnia, weight gain, irritability, fatigue or lack of energy – which they're surprised to hear may be caused by their drinking habits. But once they change those habits, often the other problems go away.

Teaching people how to moderate or control their drinking, or to otherwise exchange unhealthy drinking habits for healthier ones, is an approach that is receiving wider acceptance among health professionals who treat alcohol problems. Interventions which focus on *harm reduction*, i.e. reducing the risks of harm or negative consequences from drinking, as well as cutting down on overall alcohol consumption, have been proven to be effective for many people.

In one of the most effective programs, **Behavioral Self-Control Training**, participants learn to slow their rate of drinking, figure out what triggers the desire to drink (e.g. stress, social anxiety) and explore alternatives to achieve a similar effect (e.g. relaxation) without drinking. They also set specific goals for how much and how often they will drink, and monitor their drinking. On average, following the BSCT program results in a reduction in drinking by 30 to 50 percent.

For more information about BSCT, read "*Controlling Your Drinking*" by Miller and Munoz. There are also a number of websites and self-help programs for people who want to change their drinking habits. A good place to start is <http://rethinkingdrinking.niaaa.nih.gov/> However, controlled drinking is not for everyone! Those most likely to succeed have had mild to moderate alcohol-related problems for less than 10 years, and are not physically dependent.

To find out whether a controlled drinking approach might work for you or someone you know, or for an objective and confidential evaluation of your drinking habits, please contact me at:

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