

Five Minutes to Thrive

Alcohol & The Pandemic

Many people are coping with more than they otherwise would during this pandemic due to stressors like juggling telework, home schooling, loss of employment, and/or fears about loved ones working in “essential” sectors of the economy. In the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, some US Governors declared alcohol retailers “essential businesses”, loosening restrictions on sales and delivery services.



According to various estimates, sales of certain types of alcohol are up as much as 50%. We’ve observed a tendency toward stockpiling behavior during widespread crises, but history also reveals a pattern of increased sales of cheap alcohol during economic downturns and otherwise stressful periods as a means of coping.

People consume alcohol for a variety of reasons: to produce feelings of euphoria, unwind after a long day, facilitate social interactions, and short-term stress relief. However, the benefits of *increased* alcohol consumption are outweighed by both short and long-term impacts to physical & mental health, and risks to public safety. According to the National Institutes of Health, just over half of Americans age 18 and above (55.3%) drank alcohol in the past 30 days; just over a quarter binge drank, and 1 in 17 (5.8%) had mild to severe alcohol use disorders (AUD).

For those struggling with a severe AUD, alcohol may *indeed* be “essential” in light of currently overwhelmed medical resources, and legitimate concerns about symptoms of alcohol withdrawal. It’s important to note, however, that during pandemics, even normal alcohol consumption can quickly escalate into a serious problem due to a variety of factors including reduced daily structure and social pressure to limit alcohol use. Researchers note that many people will, for the first time, develop an alcohol use disorder during this pandemic.

Alcohol consumption is a risk factor in intimate partner violence (IPV), a topic we covered in last week’s 5M2T. Excessive drinking can exacerbate financial difficulties, childcare problems, infidelity, and other stressors. It also affects cognitive functioning, reducing self-control and non-violent negotiation capabilities. The World Health Organization estimates that 55% of US cases of IPV are alcohol-related.

People struggling with addiction tend to be at greater risk for anxiety, depression, and loneliness - conditions made worse by physical distancing and social isolation. These stressors can make it a struggle to start a new day, or unwind as the day ends. If you're finding that your day is bookended by caffeine in the morning and alcohol at night, then here are some tips for getting a grip on your alcohol use during this pandemic:

Self-assess:

- Do you drink more than 4 drinks a day (men) or 3 drinks a day (women)?
- Can you imagine a day without any drinking? If not, ask yourself, "why is that?"
- Is drinking interfering with your emotions? Are you experiencing spikes in irritability, anxiety and/or depression?
- Have you gotten angry when someone observed that your drinking has increased?
- Do your thoughts or conversations seem more focused than usual on drinking?

Try on some new behaviors:

- Call a friend at the beginning of your evening to check in
- Go for a 20-minute walk, try online yoga, or do yard work to reduce stress that has built up over the day
- At the end of the day, tell yourself consciously "I'm doing these (above) things to make a switch in how I transition from work to personal time"

If you, or someone you care about is having problems with alcohol, help is available, even during this pandemic. Reach out to your Airman Resilience Team, or the resources below:

- **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)** 1-800-662-HELP (4357); <https://www.samhsa.gov/find-help/national-helpline>
- **Alcoholics Anonymous** <https://www.aa.org/>
- **In The Rooms** <https://www.intherooms.com/home/>

Also, check out the VA's new "COVID Coach" app which helps individuals & families build resilience, manage stress, and increase their well-being during this pandemic. Users can track their mood, visualize their progress, and find resources for additional help and support. The app is available for IOS devices and is coming soon for Android devices.



VA Mobile Apps

Mobile Apps: COVID Coach

The COVID Coach app was created for everyone, including Veterans and Servicemembers, to support self-care and overall mental health during the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic.

Features include:

- Education about coping during the pandemic
- Tools for self-care and to improve emotional well-being
- Trackers to check your mood and measure your growth toward personal goals
- Graphs to visualize progress over time

Download iTunes (iOS)

The image shows a promotional banner for VA Mobile Apps. The main title is 'VA Mobile Apps' in white text on a dark blue background. Below this, there's a section for 'Mobile Apps: COVID Coach'. It features a green and yellow app icon with a sun and a person. To the right of the icon is a list of features: 'Education about coping during the pandemic', 'Tools for self-care and to improve emotional well-being', 'Trackers to check your mood and measure your growth toward personal goals', and 'Graphs to visualize progress over time'. Below the features is a 'Download iTunes (iOS)' button with an Apple logo. On the far right, there is a small image of a smartphone displaying the app's interface, which includes a mood tracker and progress graphs.