



COPING STRATEGIES

Once you have started to understand your drinking and your behaviour, you can learn strategies for coping with them.

The key to coping is: You can recognise the signs and modify your behaviour, and accept cravings and urges without automatically drinking heavily.

Most people learn a few coping strategies and stick with them. Remember to think them out beforehand and practice them.

The most common ones are:

Escape

- Just leave or get away from the situation, person or place that seems to create the risk to go back to previous behaviour. If you find yourself in a situation where you feel that it will lead to heavy drinking then you need to leave.
- You can plan escapes and excuses. For example, if this person does this then I will do that and avoid this.

Avoid

- Avoid the things that lead to you being put in a risky situation – could be anger, frustration and disappointment.
- Avoid any situation, person or place that has been linked in your mind with the chain of events that led to heavy drinking. This is an easy strategy but you will be more successful if you work out what your high risk situations are before they happen. You might also look for “red flags” that warn you in advance that you are close to a high risk situation.

Distract yourself

- Pay attention to something else.
- Distract yourself with another activity which can be fun or useful or at least less harmful. If the urge is very strong, do something to distract yourself – something that you have enjoyed before and which will take your mind off the feelings. Some people use a very specific task such as counting things e.g. bricks in a wall, books on a shelf, doing arithmetic continuously taking away 7 from 1000, 993, 986 etc or saying the alphabet backwards. Any simple activity that you can do



quickly can fill up your attention and leaves no room for the risky behaviour.

There are many other strategies for coping with urges and cravings. These include:

Thought stopping

- When you notice your feelings begin to change and you are thinking more about drinking perhaps wake yourself up with a shout like – STOP! (out loud or in your head). Some people press an imaginary button or switch to turn it off.

Thinking it through

- How strong is the feeling to drink a lot? Worse than having my finger nails pulled out?
- What will happen once I am drinking heavily? Think it through to the end – some people draw mental pictures of the future if they give in to the feelings, and if they don't!
- Remember why you are doing this – some people write down their reasons for changing and carry them in their wallet or purse to look at when they begin to realise those feelings
- Use the past – remember what has worked before. Remind yourself that the urge will pass. Think about other urges you have that you resist. How do you do that?

Riding the wave

- Know your feelings. Notice that like a wave, your cravings or urges will grow and grow but later grow weaker and disappear. Understanding this, despite the discomfort, can help drive this message home. Use the picture of riding a wave, as if on a surfboard, to show that staying up despite fear or discomfort is a skill that you can master. Anger, fear, sorrow, pain and depression will fly through your brain as quickly as pleasure. If you allow yourself to sit with these negative feelings, you will find they will pass.

Sitting it out

- With or without another strategy, simply don't fall into the same pattern of behaviour and let the time pass into a heavy drinking session. If you can deal with the situation, event, or behaviour then the feeling will disappear. Just as you don't notice smells and noises after a while, so difficult feelings are the same.



Phoning a friend

- If possible talk to someone you trust. This may be a friend, your partner, your alcohol worker, or call a helpline. A lot of people find that talking to someone who has been through the same thing helps a lot. Keep a list of emergency numbers – people you can talk to when you are in a high risk situation.
- Whatever strategy you use, it will be much more successful if you have planned it beforehand.