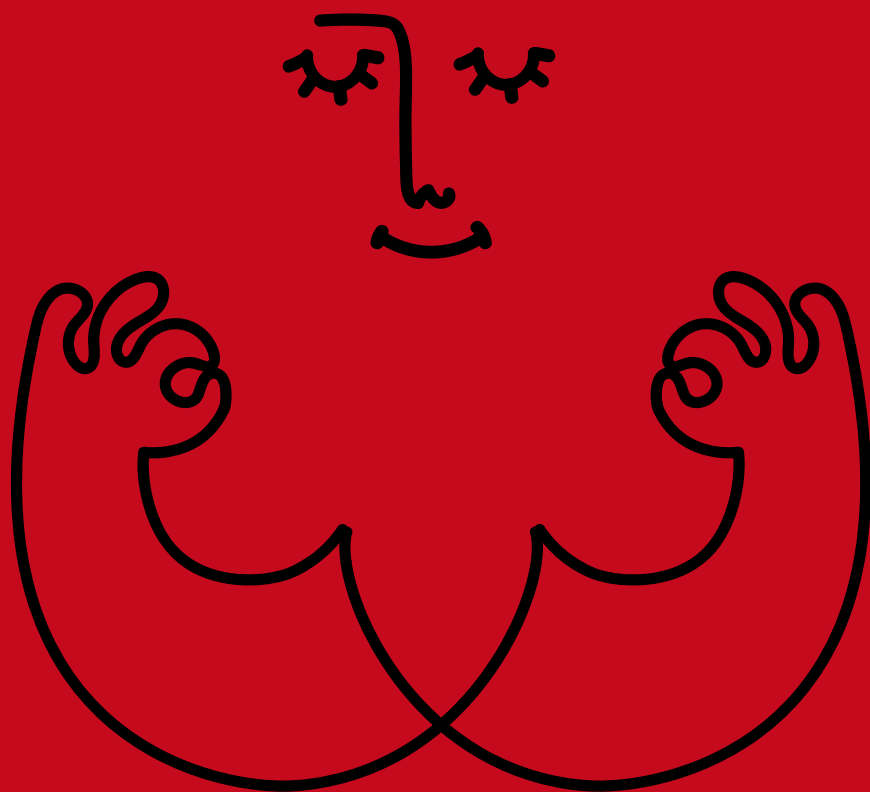


ALCOHOL AND YOUR HEALTH

Stopping drinking



Health New Zealand
Te Whatu Ora

The Alcohol and Your Health booklets

This booklet is one of the five booklets in the Alcohol and Your Health series.

Each of the booklets is written for a particular group. Four are targeted towards the person experiencing problems with alcohol and one is for those close to the person who drinks.

The series Alcohol and Your Health (2013) is by Ian MacEwan and is the fifth edition of the series originally called *Your Drinking and Your Health* written by Ian MacEwan and Greg Ariel, and based on concepts developed by the Scottish DRAMS project.

This series has been re-released with minor revisions in 2022 and 2024.

The Alcohol and Your Health series includes:

- *Is your drinking okay?*
- *Cutting down*
- *Stopping drinking*
- *Maintaining the change*
- *Concerned about someone's drinking?*

Introduction

This booklet will offer you ideas and strategies to stop drinking. You are clear about why not drinking is important to you. If not, and if you are worried about your drinking, why not discuss your concerns with someone you trust, perhaps a close friend or a counsellor at your local alcohol and drug service.

There is another booklet in this series called *Is your drinking okay?* It may help you decide what is right for you. Once you've made the decision to stop, you can concentrate on making it work.

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Part 1

Why stop?

A common story told by people with drinking problems is that alcohol slowly, maybe over years, becomes more and more important in their lives. What starts as an enjoyable social activity becomes a relationship that begins to edge out, under-mine or break up relationships with parents, family, partner, friends and workmates, and involvement in sports, hobbies and interests. Eventually, many find that the most important relationship has become the one with alcohol and it has become important to ensure it is always available. The thought of not having it is like a relationship break-up. Becoming aware of these lost or damaged relationships, which used to be so important, is the beginning of their recovery.

Another common story is the wearing down of the body, the mind, the hopes and the happiness from long-term heavy drinking. People talk of becoming sick and tired and depressed and feeling that they have lost their sense of purpose. Becoming sick and tired of being sick and tired is their beginning of recovery.

Drinkers become afraid of what might happen if they can't stop. They attempt to cut down, or go without drinking for a period, but their drinking quickly returns, increasing in quantity and frequency. This loss of personal control over drinking is a major concern for many who decide to stop.

When personal values become important

Some worry that their sense of personal value, how they want to see themselves and to be seen by others, has been undermined or attacked by their dependence on alcohol.

- A value like **te aroha**: having regard for others and those for whom you are responsible and to whom you are accountable.
- A value like **te whakapono**: the basis of your beliefs and the confidence that what you're doing is right.
- Or a value like **ngā ture**: the knowledge that your actions are morally and ethically right, and that you're acting honourably.

How has drinking affected these values for you?

Who should stop drinking?

It is not always necessary to stop drinking completely if you have problems with alcohol. There are individuals who once drank heavily who have learned to drink in moderation. This is more difficult than giving up completely. It's hard work and takes determination to learn controlled drinking if your drinking has been out of control. There are times when small amounts of alcohol will be damaging or dangerous, such as:

- when there is evidence of medical damage caused by alcohol, which is likely to get worse with continued drinking. The liver, pancreas, brain and other parts of the body may be harmed by alcohol. This can become permanent and may prove fatal
- if continued drinking is likely to prove harmful to other medical conditions not originally caused by alcohol
- if you have already tried to cut down on the amount you drink, but have been unable to do so for very long. In this case it might be best for you to quit alcohol altogether.

There are other reasons for not drinking. Drinking may be the cause of, or contributing to, problems at home or at work. Spending too much money on drinking may leave you short of money, even in debt. Here are three questions to ask yourself:

- 1. What are the problems?**
- 2. What will happen if I don't stop drinking?**
- 3. What kind of person (for example, parent, grandparent, partner, of value to others, self-respecting) do I want to be and how is the drinking getting in the way of being that person?**

Getting the most out of this booklet

Take an active part in solving your problems. Make the effort to understand the ideas and apply them. There are exercises to complete. *Stopping drinking* is about working with you towards a happier and healthier life.

Reading through the booklet once will not be enough. Read it slowly and carefully, at least two or three times. Mark the parts that apply to you.

Keep the booklet handy so you can refer to it easily. Spend time going over it regularly, even when things are going well. The advice will work if you review and apply the ideas suggested until not drinking has become an accepted way of life for you.

Are you ready?

You need to know within yourself that it's important to stop and that, with help, you can imagine yourself alcohol-free.

Here's a rough guide to thinking about whether you're ready now: On a scale of 1 to 10, where 1 is the lowest and 10 is the highest, what number would you say matches how important it is to you to stop drinking now?

10	Most important for me to stop drinking now
9	
8	
7	
6	
5	It is important but not enough for me to stop now
4	
3	
2	
1	Not important at all for me to stop drinking

If that number is 7 or higher, now is the right time. If it's lower than that, maybe there's something more important for you right now and stopping drinking will become more important later.

If you come up with a lower number, you might ask yourself what would need to happen before you would give stopping drinking a 7 or higher number.

Stopping drinking? Let's continue

Think about the problems or concerns in your life – in your relationships with others, your view of who you want to be, your health, maybe your work or your financial situation. How are these connected with your drinking? Complete the following:

1.
 2.
 3.
 4.
 5.
-

If you have second thoughts later on, these will remind you why it's important for you to stop drinking.

Part 2

Five factors associated with successful recovery

- 1. Social stability:** ensure that your accommodation is safe, your employment is secure, your debts are being managed and your immediate relationships are secure.
- 2. A strong new interest** to distract you from thinking about drinking and in which you become keenly involved.
- 3. Reminders that drinking is bad news for you:** fridge magnets, messages on your bathroom mirror, friends who care about you and who will, when necessary, remind you that drinking is not for you and why.
- 4. Good social support:** establishing or re-establishing stable and supportive social relationships with people who want to see you stop drinking and be well.
- 5. A source of inspiration, hope and enhanced self-esteem** that takes you beyond yourself and encourages you to develop into a better person.

The first steps

Now that you've decided to quit drinking, where do you start? Alcohol has played an important part in your life. It will have influenced the places you've been to, the people you've met and the things you've done. Be prepared to make changes.

From day one, there are things to do:

Take some common-sense precautions

Remove alcohol from your home. Avoid pubs, clubs, bottle stores and the homes of your former drinking acquaintances. Avoid anywhere that could tempt you to buy or drink alcohol. The more difficult it is to access alcohol, the less likely you are to give in to the urge to drink.

Let others know

Tell your family and friends that you have stopped drinking. Ask them to help. If they say, *"I've heard it all before,"* don't let this get you down. They'll feel that your past drinking has made it hard for them to simply change overnight. It will take time and they'll want to see some change before raising their hopes. Become more determined to stick to your decision. They will become important allies in your resolve. Some people will try to change your mind by telling you that *"a couple of drinks"* can't do any harm. The problem is that you don't stop at a couple of drinks. If your friends can't accept your decision to stop drinking, find people who are willing to support you.

Find out who will help

Just as there will be those keen to see you continue drinking, there will be others who will be pleased to help you to stop. Put this goodwill to use. Ask someone close to you to become your supporter. Their role is to encourage you when the going gets tough. Have several supporters – one of them might be your family doctor. Each can help you overcome a different problem. These supporters are vital. Think about who is most interested in seeing you get well. But remember, the responsibility for stopping drinking lies with you.

If you can't think of anyone to support you in not drinking, you can use some of the services listed here. You don't have to pick just one – having more than one provides you with more support and options. There also may be times when a supporter can't be reached. These services have helped thousands of people to recover from their dependence on alcohol.

- Your local alcohol and drug service.
- Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) aa.org.nz.
- Or contact the alcohol and drug helpline on **0800 787 797** or at alcoholdrughelp.org.nz.

In the following table, write down your supporters' names and details.

My supporters are:

A.	Ph.
B.	Ph.
C.	Ph.
D.	Ph.
E.	Ph.

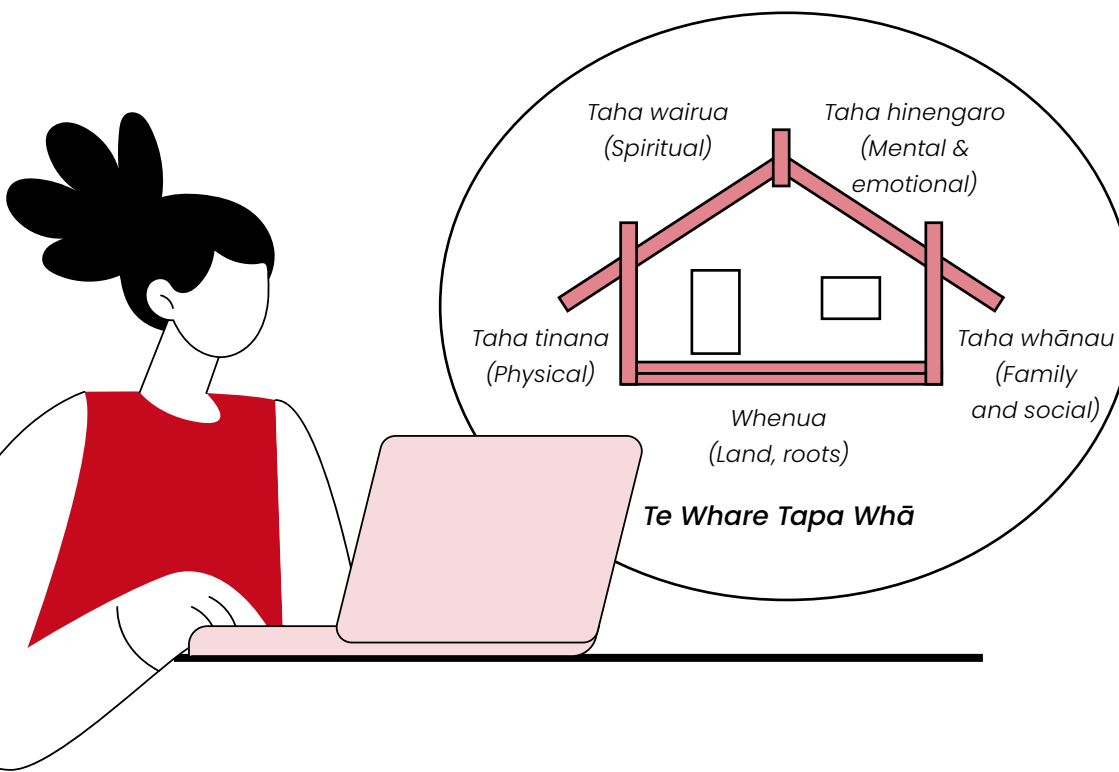


The four strands of the rope

Māori talk of the four strands that make up the rope of life: wairua, hinengaro, tinana and whānau. Like the four walls of a house (Te Whare Tapa Whā), a healthy life requires these four strands: healthy spirit, healthy mind, healthy body and healthy family. It is important in recovery that you pay equal attention to each of these.

To take a broad interpretation, the **spirit** is about your values: what is important to you and what kind of person you want to be, restoring a positive sense of who you are.

The healthy **mind** means that you recognise depression or anxiety or phobias that you may have, and you get them treated or get help to learn how to manage them.



You need to look after your **body** and eat healthily and exercise it and treat it respectfully.

You need to repair relationships where you can with **family and friends**, for these will be your future strengths. Whānau also covers rebuilding your life in the community and the wider family. Much of your hope in recovery will be built on knowing that someone believes in you and your building your own personal goals.

Build up your strength

If you have been drinking heavily, chances are you have been neglecting your body in other ways too. You may be going without breakfast if your stomach is unsettled after drinking the night before. You may be missing out on other meals owing to lack of time, money or appetite. Your body is being deprived of the protein, vitamins and minerals needed to keep healthy. A poor diet is one cause of the severe memory problems that heavy drinkers sometimes develop. Unless they stop drinking and start eating a sensible diet, this damage to the brain can become permanent. Even if your problems don't yet seem as bad as this, eat healthy food.

Exercise plays an important part in your drive back to health. If you are very unfit, you should build up slowly by exercising regularly for short periods. Walking is a way to start. Over time, increase the distance you cover and also your speed. Graduate from walking in a local park to exploring the regional parks. Swimming, biking and jogging are other forms of exercise. The rules are the same – start slowly and build up your stamina gently. If you're not sure, ask your doctor.

Learn to say “No thank you”

Avoid your old drinking haunts. But at some point you will end up in a situation, such as at a work party or wedding, where you'll come under pressure to drink. Remember that alcohol is alcohol no matter how it is presented. A glass of beer or wine contains as much alcohol as a measure of spirits. An important skill for you to develop before this happens is the art of refusing alcoholic drinks. There is a growing acceptance of people deciding not to drink because of health, especially when reducing, or keeping down, their weight. We all know people who try to force drink on others – even when their offers have been refused several times. Under this kind of pressure, it can take a lot more courage to say “No”, and stick to your decision.



To become a non-drinker, you'll find it necessary to learn new answers to the question *"What will you have to drink?"* Some examples of what you could say are:

"No thanks, I'm under doctor's orders not to drink."

"No thanks, but I'd really like a juice."

"Nothing thank you. I don't drink alcohol."

"No, keeping an eye on the weight."

Practise saying "No". Ask someone you trust to take on the role of a 'friend' trying to persuade you to have a drink. Your job is to find the right message to give to refuse the drink, politely but firmly.

The next step might be to practise ordering safe drinks such as the popular lemon, lime and soda that bar staff are very used to serving, or non-alcoholic cocktails, mineral water, or a cup of tea or coffee. It might be a bit awkward when you first start, but the exercise will prove its worth the next time you are under pressure to drink alcohol. You'll find yourself able to refuse a drink or order non-alcoholic drinks with confidence. Why not make a list of non-alcoholic drinks that you enjoy?

Out of the frying pan

While the aim is to help you to stop drinking alcohol, there are other substances in daily use that also affect your wellbeing, such as cigarettes, tea and coffee. The nicotine in tobacco products, and the caffeine in tea and coffee also act as stimulants. Don't drink too much tea or coffee and don't use smoking as a way to calm yourself down, or you'll begin to feel edgy or anxious. This in turn might increase your urge to drink alcohol in the hope that it will help you to relax.



Change your thinking about alcohol

If you believe that alcohol can help you to cope with your problems, you will continue to be at risk of drinking again. **Alcohol is a drug.** Like many other drugs that can affect the nervous system, it is addictive. It can kill. It causes the steady build-up of damage to the body. As you begin to drink on a regular basis it takes more alcohol to have the same effect. Your body becomes tolerant of the effects of alcohol. In people who are tolerant of alcohol, the body shows signs of 'protest' when they stop drinking. Once the body tissues have adapted to being surrounded by alcohol, the absence of alcohol sets off a withdrawal reaction: excessive sweating, shakiness, restlessness and hallucinations (seeing or hearing things that aren't really there). These are all signs of physical addiction or dependence. Before physical dependence develops, you may become psychologically dependent. You believe that you can't relax or enjoy yourself, or can't cope with a problem, unless you have a drink first. Such thinking is mistaken. Most people cope with life's problems without turning to alcohol. You can too. And if you drink to be one of the crowd or a good sport, or to impress others, you need to ask yourself if it is worth the risk of harming your relationships, your health and your self-respect.

Develop your interests

To stop drinking, one of the changes you'll need to make is the way you use your time. You may have spent lots of time drinking or doing things that encouraged you to drink, like working under stress or going to the pub for a 'boys'/girls' night out'. It's important that you think now about how you'll live your life differently. If you just stop drinking and don't fill your time with activities you enjoy, you may end up fed-up, bored and frustrated, and tempted to start drinking again. Draw up a list of activities and interests you

would like to take up. Think of the activities you enjoyed before you began drinking regularly. Enquire at your local library or community centre to find out what is available. Organise your free time and you'll increase your chances of finding an interest you enjoy. Write down your ideas on the next page:

1. Things to do:

2. Places/people to visit:

Live for each day

The thought of never having another alcoholic drink may seem overwhelming. You might feel the task is too hard. Don't worry about what might happen in the months ahead; concentrate on today. You are determined not to drink today rather than brood over how you'll manage next week. Planning for tomorrow is helpful; worrying or brooding is not.

Part 3

Remaining a non-drinker: Planning for the longer term

If you have tried to break a habit before, whether it's biting your nails, smoking or heavy drinking, you know that stopping is not the difficult part.

It's staying stopped that's harder

As the pack-a-day smoker says, *"Giving up is easy; I've done it hundreds of times!"* Habits are well-learned behaviours. They seem to happen automatically. It's as if they have a life of their own. But if we look closely, we can see that this isn't the case.

Things called cues

Habits are triggered by particular people, places and events. These are known as 'cues' because they cue or prompt us to behave in a particular way. There are two sorts of cue. 'Outside cues' are the things around us that affect our behaviour. The 'cross now' sign at a traffic crossing is an outside cue that tells us when it's safe to cross the road. 'Inside cues' are feelings or thoughts that direct our behaviour. Feeling thirsty is an inside cue that prompts us to drink. Sometimes our behaviour can be affected by a combination of outside and inside cues. Imagine walking past a bakery and catching the delicious smell of freshly baked bread. Instantly you feel hungry. In this case, the smell of bread is an outside cue. This triggers a feeling of hunger – an inside cue. Together, these cues tempt you to go into the shop to buy a pastry or bun to eat.

Drinking cues

A problem for heavy drinkers is that they tend to be 'cued' to drink by many more situations than moderate drinkers. While the moderate drinker is choosy about where, when and with whom they drink, the heavy drinker is not. They may be tempted to have a drink by something as simple as walking past a pub. Even the sight of alcohol in a shop window or on TV can set off the urge to drink. In the same way, the heavy drinker is more likely to turn to drink when feeling bored, fed-up, sad, angry or happy than the moderate drinker. The heavy drinker ends up organising their life around alcohol.

You need to learn how to spot potential drinking situations before they happen. You'll become aware of the cues that can lead you to drink. Once you know where, when and what your cues are, you can take steps to avoid them. If they're impossible to avoid, you'll learn to cope with them differently. You'll identify which situations may put you at risk of drinking again.

How to identify cues

Gather some information about your drinking habits. If you have already stopped drinking, think back to when you were drinking alcohol on a regular basis. What were the cues that triggered your drinking? The following questions may help you identify your cues:

WHERE did/do I drink most often?

Make a list of your usual drinking places. It might include certain pubs, cafes and clubs as well as your own home or those of fellow drinkers.

WHEN did/do I drink most often?

Is there a pattern in the days of the week or the time of day? By being aware of the danger times, you can avoid temptation. If you usually go to a bar on your way home from work, there may be strong cues to drink around five o'clock. Friday or Saturday evenings may be cue times if you have been in the habit of going 'out on the town' at weekends.

WHO did/do I usually drink with?

People are cues for drinking. Meet a friend who is teetotal, and you're unlikely to go to a bar for a chat. Bump into a drinking acquaintance, and your first inclination may be to head to the pub.

WHAT things trigger my drinking?

Successes, celebrations and disappointments are often marked by drinking. Weddings, funerals, promotions, redundancy, farewells and reunions act as outside cues that prompt us to drink. They generate strong feelings of joy or sadness that make us want to drink.



Inside cues that tempt us to drink

We're not robots responding to cues automatically. What we think and feel affects our behaviour, and stirs up cues for drinking. Some people use alcohol to increase the 'good' feelings they have if they are celebrating. At other times, they use alcohol as an anaesthetic to numb 'bad' feelings of emotional upset. The link between outside and inside cues, and the effects they have on behaviour, can be seen in the examples below.

Outside cue	Inside cue	Response
Argument with partner	<i>Thought:</i> I'll show them a thing or two <i>Feelings:</i> Hurt or anger	Get cans of beer from the fridge and start drinking
In pub with friends	<i>Thought:</i> I'll have a good blow-out tonight <i>Feelings:</i> On top of the world	Drink too much – too quickly – get drunk
At home on Saturday night, alone	<i>Thought:</i> Maybe a drink will cheer me up <i>Feelings:</i> Sad or lonely	Drink a half-bottle of whisky or bottle of wine

Exercise 1: Your cues

The next exercise points out situations that can lead you to drinking. Think about your drinking habits in the past six months.

How often have you ended up drinking in each of the situations listed? Put a circle around the number that best describes your answer. The numbers range from 0 for 'never' to 3 for 'almost always'.

I drank	Never	Sometimes	Often	Almost always
1. When I was feeling 'low' (e.g. sad, lonely, depressed, worried).	0	1	2	3
2. If I felt under pressure and wanted to relax (e.g. anxious, problems to solve, nothing going right, things on my mind).	0	1	2	3
3. When I felt threatened in any way (e.g. had to justify myself, was afraid, had an argument).	0	1	2	3
4. If I felt unsure of myself (e.g. meeting new people, expressing my opinions or feelings, chatting someone up).	0	1	2	3
5. If I felt physically low (e.g. shaky, in pain, sick, needed to sleep, had a hangover).	0	1	2	3
6. When I felt frustrated or angry about what had happened or what someone had done.	0	1	2	3
7. When I felt awkward about refusing drinks; to be polite (e.g. in someone's home, at the work's night out).	0	1	2	3
8. When people around me were drinking (e.g. at a party, wedding, dance, restaurant).	0	1	2	3

I drank	Never	Sometimes	Often	Almost always
9. When I had no real purpose for drinking (e.g. just a habit of time, place, people).	0	1	2	3
10. When 'sights and sounds' reminded me of drinking (e.g. adverts, passing a pub, getting a bottle of a favourite drink, familiar faces and places).	0	1	2	3
11. When I wanted to prove I was in control (e.g. to show I could handle a few drinks, to test my willpower with alcohol).	0	1	2	3
12. For pleasure (e.g. to enjoy the taste, to have 'even more fun', to satisfy a thirst, to feel good).	0	1	2	3
13. When I wanted to celebrate something.	0	1	2	3
14. When I wanted to cheer myself up and forget my worries.	0	1	2	3
15. Because most of my friends drink heavily.	0	1	2	3
16. When I was bored, or just needed to do something, or got comfort from the act of drinking.	0	1	2	3

Write down any other situations that, in your experience, have set off a bout of heavy drinking.

I drank	Sometimes	Often	Almost always
17.	1	2	3
18.	1	2	3
19.	1	2	3
20.	1	2	3
21.	1	2	3

It is those questions where you have scored 2 or 3 that you need to target. They give you information about your drinking.

You need to find different ways of getting what you want from life, which you can read about in the next part of this booklet. Before moving on to this, take a closer look at your drinking cues.

Exercise 2: Your drinking cues

Risky situations hold strong cues for drinking. These cues come from places, people or events round you – or from thoughts and feelings within you. Think about the cues and risky situations that have been factors in your drinking.

Identify outside cues

With the table from page 20 in mind, think back to times when you've been drinking. Ask yourself where, when and with whom you usually drink or drank, and pinpoint those outside cues. Note these in columns A, B and C on page 26. If you're aware of any incidents or events (e.g. pay day or receiving a final demand for a bill) that tended to spark off a drinking session, note them in column D on page 27.

Identify inside cues

How did the incidents or events you noted in column D make you feel? Maybe an argument, a bereavement or a celebration generated certain thoughts and feelings in you, from happiness to anger to loneliness. Some of these thoughts and feelings are more likely to make you want to have a drink. If so, note these in column E.

Confidence to cope with cues

In the last column of the cues table, discover how confident you feel about not drinking in the situations you have identified, when they arise again in the future. The scale is from 1 to 10. If you're confident of not drinking, you might score as high as 9 or 10. If you're unsure one way or the other, you would score 5. If you think it would be hard for you not to drink, you would probably score 1 or 2 on the confidence scale. There are a couple of examples. Work out and write down the cues that you experience. You can then order them from not risky to highly risky.

Learn to cope with your cues

Avoid situations that would tempt you to start drinking again. Sooner or later, you will be in a situation where you might be tempted to drink again. Plan how to cope with these situations before they crop up unexpectedly. It will be easier to deal with your low-risk cues before your high-risk cues. Look back through your answers in the cues table. How would you deal with each of them without drinking? Discuss your ideas with one of your supporters. Write down a step-by-step plan. Starting with your lowest-risk cue, put your plan into practice. Each time you attempt to deal with a new cue, have help at hand to give you support in case the situation is more difficult than you expected.

Cope with the urge to drink

Cravings or urges to drink are a sign that the brain is demanding alcohol. Withdrawal from alcohol can lead to urges, but these feelings usually pass within one or two weeks of stopping. Most urges are set off by the situations, places, people and feelings that went hand-in-hand with your drinking in the past. By working out beforehand where and when you're likely to feel the urge to drink, you'll be prepared to deal with it. Sometimes the urge to drink will jump out at you from nowhere. Here are some suggestions to take the edge off your craving.

- Urges to drink are normal. Everyone has different kinds of urges from time to time. But you can choose not to act on them.
- Imagine you're a surfer and the urge is a wave. As the wave gets bigger, the urge gets stronger. Work hard to keep your balance. Suddenly, the crest of the wave tumbles and fades away to nothing. As it does, your urge to drink will also fade.

- Resist this urge just one more time. Tell yourself that if you can resist the urge this one time, you'll feel more confident about resisting in future. In the coming weeks and months the urges will become less frequent and less intense.
- Distract yourself from thoughts of drinking. Get involved in something that occupies your body and mind. Fill yourself up with water or fruit juice.
- Dismiss thoughts that alcohol will make you feel better or more relaxed or more confident. Remind yourself of the bad side of your drinking, such as hangovers, arguments, broken relationships, wasted money and ill health.
- Step back from the urge. Take the view that urges are an early warning sign of danger. What set off the urge in the first place? What is the best way to respond (e.g. leave the situation, or solve the problem)?
- Satisfy your thirst in a harmless way. For example, treat yourself to a hot drink.

Attack the urge to drink

When you feel confident that you can control those urges, deal with them. Each time you resist an urge to drink, you strengthen your belief in your ability not to drink. It can make sense to put yourself deliberately into everyday situations that make you want to drink – as long as you feel confident that you can resist. Don't test yourself just for the sake of it, but only in those situations you know you won't be able to keep avoiding. If you do decide to test yourself, it is essential that you have one of your supporters to help. So if the urge starts to get the better of you, your supporter can step in.

Plan to deal with urges step by step

Where do you start? Urges build up over a period of time, then reach a peak before slowly fading away. It may take a couple of hours to work through this cycle at the beginning.

To begin deliberately testing yourself, first look at advertisements for alcohol, either on TV or in a newspaper. Next, you could learn to resist any urges triggered by the sight of empty drink cans

Drinking session

Cues for drinking

	A) Where	B) When	C) Who with
1.	At home	Saturday afternoon	Alone
2.	At a show	Sunday evening	Jim and Margaret
3.			
4.			
5.			
6.			
7.			
8.			

or bottles. Finally, you might go into a pub with your supporter. Success in resisting these urges under these conditions should give your confidence a boost.

But be warned! At each step there's a danger that you will give in to an urge. Before putting temptation in your way, be sure that you can cope with it and that support is on hand. Slow and steady progress is what is wanted.

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Part 4

Coping with difficulties

Cope with your emotions

One reason that people give for starting to drink after a period of non-drinking is not coping with unpleasant or painful emotions. Anxiety, boredom, depression, loneliness and anger are feelings we would rather avoid. But they are a part of life and we cope with them. Some people bottle up their feelings, which can lead to a wild outburst at the wrong time, and things may be said or done that are regretted later. Others blot out their feelings by drinking alcohol or using some other mind-altering drug. While these numb your feelings for a short time, they don't help to solve the problems. Find better ways of handling your problems and your feelings. How can you do this?

Stress and anxiety

Tension, nerves, panic and fear are feelings of anxiety. These symptoms are the body's natural response to stress. Anxiety can be thought of as an alarm that warns us when problems are developing. When we're under stress, hormones such as adrenalin are released into the blood.

The blood carries these hormones around the body, preparing it for action. The heart and breathing rates increase, and sweating helps to keep the body cool. At low levels, this reaction helps us to tackle problems by making us more alert. At work or playing sport, it spurs us on to greater things.

But if the level of stress becomes too much, the brain becomes over-excited and we start to feel out of control. We may then feel panic, fear or some other form of distress.

Individual differences

Different people become anxious for different reasons. Some are terrified of insects while others keep them as pets. Some hate heights while others enjoy mountain climbing and hang-gliding. This shows that it's not the event that causes anxiety. It's what we make of the event that determines whether we feel anxious or not.

Although an anxiety reaction might be expected following a traumatic event such as bereavement or a physical assault, anxiety can just as easily develop after a number of smaller stresses. Someone who is not sleeping well, is arguing with their partner and is constantly short of money will probably feel anxious.

Sometimes tension and anxiety seem to build up for no good reason. In trying to make sense of your feelings, it is easy to think you might be ill or, worse still, going mad. This new worry only adds to the anxiety.



Master tension and anxiety

Tension and anxiety can build up for any number of reasons and there is more than one way to tackle them.

Solve problems

If you have a definite problem or worry, deal with it. It's tempting to put things off. But your problem will only be resolved and your anxiety lessened if you tackle it.

First, gather as much information as you can about the problem. Write down the problem as briefly as you can. Think of as many possible solutions as you can, no matter how unlikely they might seem to be. Think through the likely consequences of each solution, then choose what appears to be the best option. Act on your decision.

If the problem remains, choose the option that seems to offer the best chance of a good outcome. Check this out with a friend or supporter (refer to the list you made earlier in this booklet) first.

Not all problems have a perfect answer. Sometimes you make the best of a difficult situation. However, it's better to act than to do nothing and worry.

Learn to relax

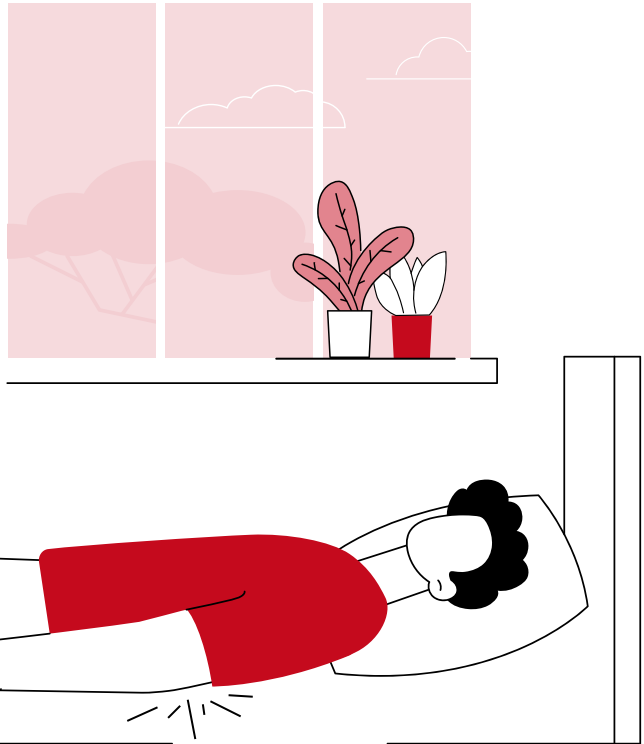
Many people believe they can relax when they watch TV each night. But this is often not the case. Even while sitting in a chair, our muscles may be tensed up. It takes effort to relax properly. Being able to relax properly is important. Look at different ways of getting yourself to truly relax. Simply lying back and listening to music can be enough. But a better way is learning how to control the tension in your muscles.

Follow these steps to learn how to relax your muscles:

- 1.** Tense up one group of muscles (say your leg muscles).
- 2.** Notice what the feelings of tension are like.
- 3.** Relax the muscles.
- 4.** Notice the different feeling when relaxed.
- 5.** Let these feelings and the relaxation increase.

Do this for each group of muscles. You might work through them like this:

- right arm
- left arm
- neck
- scalp
- face
- shoulders
- back
- chest
- stomach
- right leg
- left leg.



Practise in a quiet, darkened room and give yourself plenty of time. Some people find relaxation soundtracks helpful; you can find these in shops and online.

Physical exercise

Aerobics, swimming, squash, running, walking, football, weight training, badminton and 100 other sports are a great way to relax.

If you exercise regularly, you'll be less tense and anxious. Why not start to exercise? If you're unsure how to begin, approach your local gym or find information online. If you're very unfit, consult your doctor before you start any strenuous physical exercise.

Yoga is another good way of learning to relax. Muscle relaxation, yoga and meditation all require effort to relax the mind and body.

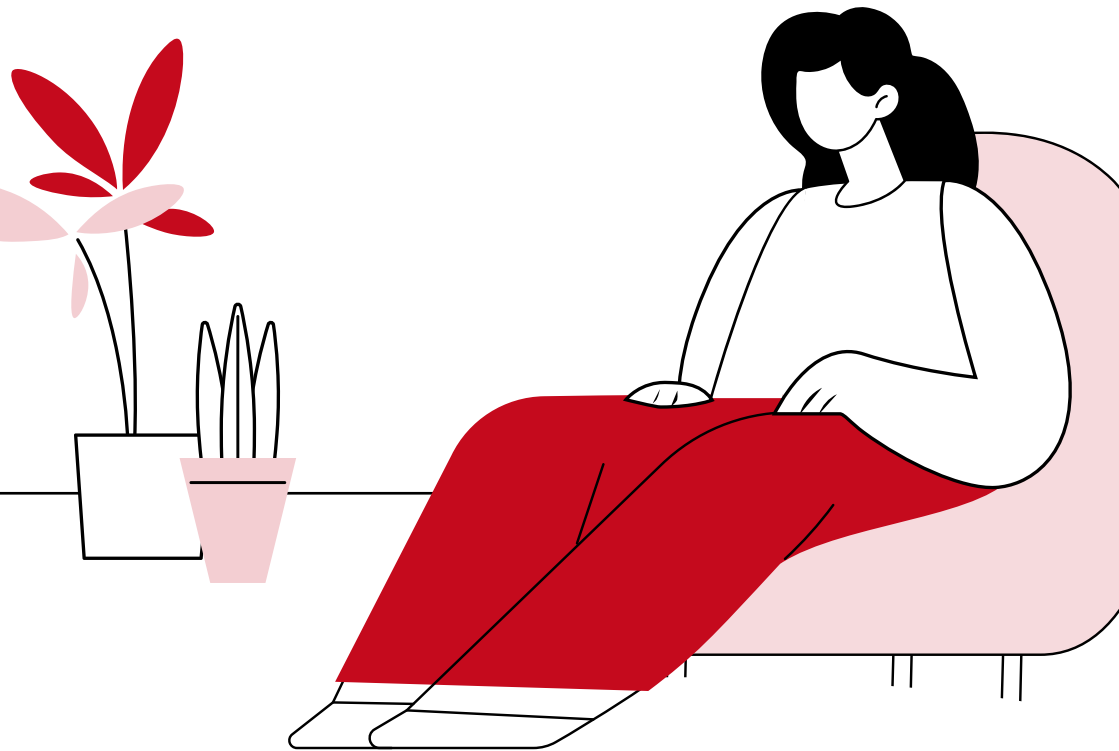
These methods of relaxing should be carried out each day to have the best effect. Setting aside this time is not always easy. Results will be worth the effort.

The following exercise gives guidelines for one type of relaxation. Before trying it out, remove any tight-fitting clothing and jewellery. Make sure that the room is comfortably warm and that you won't be disturbed.

Exercise 3: Meditational relaxation

- Sit quietly in a comfortable position (put your feet flat on the floor and lay your hands flat on your lap).
- Close your eyes.
- Breathe through your nose. Become aware of your breathing.
- Breathe easily and naturally, not deeply.
- Whenever your thoughts wander to other things, don't worry. Just slowly guide yourself back.
- Carry on doing this for 15 to 20 minutes. Open your eyes to check the time, but don't set an alarm. With practice, you'll acquire an in-built awareness of how long you've been relaxing.

- Don't worry about whether you have been successful in becoming deeply relaxed. Keep a peaceful state of mind and let the relaxation happen at its own pace. If you're distracted (and this is common when you first start), ease yourself back gently.
- When you finish, sit quietly for several minutes. Sit with your eyes open. Don't stand up for a few minutes.
- With practice, the relaxation will come easily. Practise how to do this once or twice a day, but not within two hours of eating a large meal as digestion of food prevents a good level of relaxation. Imagine being somewhere pleasant, such as lying on a beach on a warm, sunny day. It can help to play soft background music. Decide when and where you will try this relaxation exercise. Practise it at least once a day for a fortnight. Give it a reasonable chance to tell if it has been beneficial or not. Skills improve through practice – and relaxation is a skill. Allow yourself enough time to build your expertise.



Look after your mental health

The term 'depression' is used for a range of feelings, from being 'down in the dumps' to feeling there is no point in living any more. Many people drink when they feel down. When you feel depressed for long periods, you can get stuck in a very low emotional state. Alcohol is a depressant and guarantees to make this worse. If you're feeling fed-up or that you're missing out on life, there are things you can do to lift your mood.

Some suggestions:

- Learn more about caring for your wairua and managing depression from depression.org.nz or practice some of these techniques as well as others on smallsteps.org.nz
- Deep-breathing – This reflective technique involves slowly breathing in and out to help you feel calmer and more relaxed. This tool is guided by an animated image that inflates and deflates.
- Identify signals – identify sensations in your body that you often experience when feeling upset. You can use these as signals to react differently, use a tool, or engage in self care.
- Reframing thoughts – identify unhelpful patterns in your thoughts and beliefs and reframe them over time to help you feel better and make decisions that support your overall sense of wellbeing.
- Improving sleep – explore the things you can do or avoid that can lead to a better quality sleep.
- Gratitude practice – Learn to appreciate the small things in life through practising gratitude. Doing this regularly can help lift your mood and make you feel happier.



Assert yourself

When people have trouble standing up for their rights, they begin to feel used and worthless. Being assertive means giving as much respect to yourself as you give to others. It has nothing to do with being aggressive or awkward. If you need help in being more assertive, there are assertiveness training groups available. These are provided by psychologists and counsellors, and your doctor may be able to refer you to one. Some alcohol and drug counselling services offer them.

Reward yourself

Treats are important to give you something to look forward to. Daily rewards might be a cup of tea or coffee, reading a magazine or watching a favourite TV programme. Longer-term treats might include going to the movies, buying new clothes or having a meal out. Looking forward to these rewards can give almost as much pleasure as the treats themselves.



Deal to boredom

Now that you've given up drinking, you may be concerned about how you'll fill the extra time you have on your hands. Plan your time. Think of as many alternatives to drinking as possible, no matter how unlikely your ideas seem. Ask one of your supporters to help you.

Develop your self-confidence

Some people drink because they lack confidence, feel shy or find it hard to stick up for themselves. They might have difficulty saying "No" to people about things in general, including when they are offered drinks. Often they find it hard to express anger. They bottle things up and say nothing, or say something different from what they feel. Sometimes, much later, they 'explode' in response to some trivial incident when they should have been firmer at the time. It is not possible to deal with these problems properly here, although a few comments may help. First, confidence and assertiveness are skills, like driving a car or operating a machine.

With training and practice you can learn to behave in a confident manner. Behaving more confidently makes you more confident.

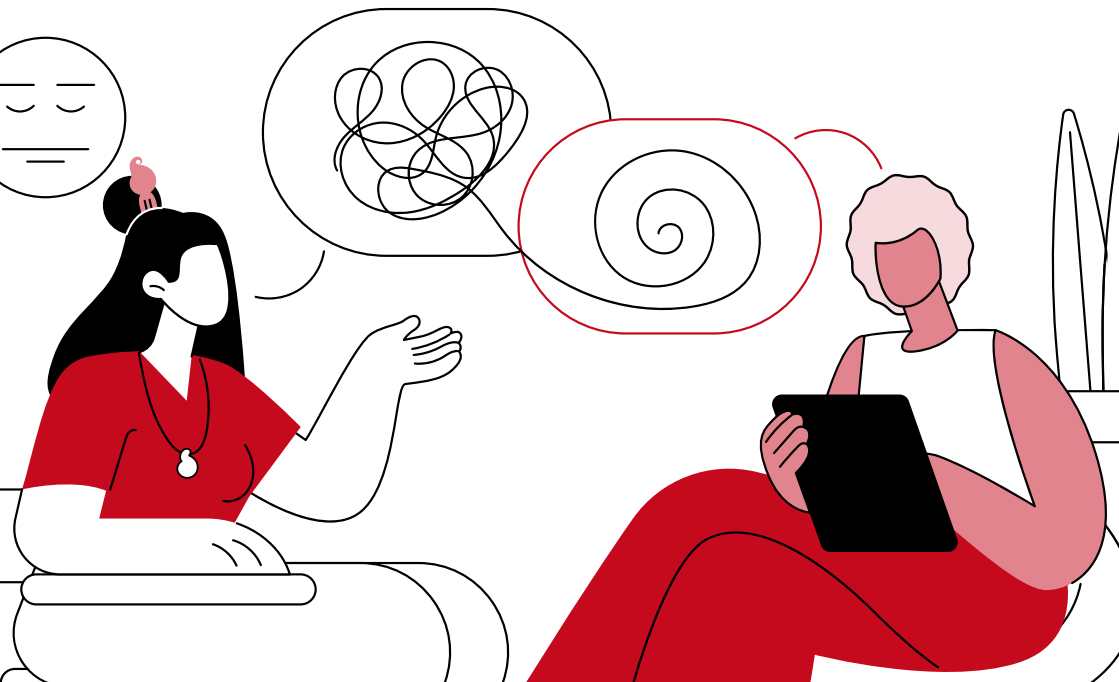
Teach yourself these skills in the same way you teach yourself to operate a machine. If you lack confidence, behave as if you are confident. If a friend asks you to join them for a drink, stop and think. Do you normally say to yourself, *"I don't want to hurt their feelings by refusing"* or *"It's too much trouble to refuse, I'll just go"*? This time, why not say, *"Thanks a lot. I'll have a coffee with you but I don't want to drink"*? Try it and see! You'll feel better for it. Take care not to go over the top – assert yourself, but don't lose your cool. There are assertiveness training and anger management groups available.

Bereavement

Bereavement leads to depressive feelings for quite a long time after the death of a loved one, sometimes for more than a year. This is a dangerous time to start drinking. It may mean that when you stop grieving you can't stop drinking. Find friends and counsellors to help you through this difficult time and avoid using alcohol as a pain-reliever. Contact the nearest hospice or social work department at your local hospital for help available to bereaved people.

Long-term depression

If you think your depression is more deep-seated than 'the blues', and you have been feeling miserable for more than a few weeks, see your doctor. Tell your doctor that you have stopped drinking. Your doctor may talk over your problems with you. If not, they will suggest where you can get help. Depression responds well to both drug and psychological treatment.



Other issues

Relationship problems

Relationship problems often lead to drinking in both men and women – or are used as an excuse for continued drinking. Sometimes cause and effect get lost in a jumble of nagging, quarrelling and bad feelings. Sometimes the drinking is the cause of the problems. If you have relationship problems, talk about them. It is astonishing how seldom two people who live together sit down and talk about the things that are dividing them. Shouting and accusations take the place of real communication. If you can't talk coolly about your problems, find a neutral person you can talk to about things.

There are many people who can help, such as a trained counsellor.

A detached view of your disagreements may help you to sort things out. Many relationships do end in break-up. If strife and unpleasantness have not been part of the splitting-up process, separation or divorce can lead to feelings similar to grief for the couple involved. The likelihood of a return to drinking during such times can increase. There are no easy answers about how to cope with these feelings, although some of the advice given about how to deal with depression and anxiety will be useful.

Sexual difficulties

People who are heavy drinkers have more sexual problems than people who are not. This is because of the effects of alcohol, which, in Shakespeare's words, "*provokes the desire but takes away the performance*". Some people drink because of sexual difficulties. Drinking makes these difficulties worse.

Sexual problems can be remedied. The guidelines are simple. One way to overcome them is to ensure that a sexual relationship is based on a warm and open emotional relationship. The key is communication. Talk about your sexual worries and problems with your partner. Discuss what you like and don't like. This might be difficult and embarrassing at first, but if you can get there the rewards will be promising.

The key elements to overcoming these problems are stopping your drinking, showing affection, communicating, and enjoying sexual preparation and foreplay without bothering too much about the result. If you can do this, there's a good chance the problems will disappear.

If you have any concerns, discuss them with your doctor.

Insomnia

Some people use alcohol to help them to sleep, although the sleep is not restful. Heavy drinking causes sleep problems, and it takes a while to return to a normal sleeping pattern once drinking has stopped.

Many of the methods for dealing with anxiety may be used for insomnia. As with sexual problems, worries about performance often inhibit the performance itself. Wait until you are tired before going to bed, even if this is two or three o'clock in the morning. Some people only need four or five hours' sleep while some need nine or ten. Maybe you're trying to sleep more than you need to. Get up and read, or watch TV if you can't sleep. If you still have problems, see your doctor.

Unemployment

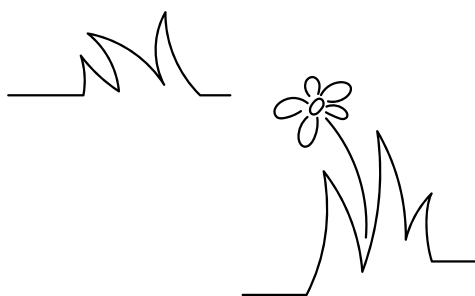
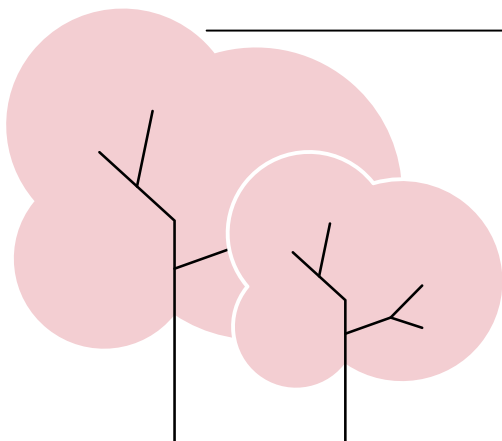
Becoming unemployed means many things for a person, most of them stressful. It can mean isolation, boredom, poverty, feelings of failure and not knowing what to do with your time.

Structure your day so you're not left with too much free time. Meet other people regularly – for instance, in a local unemployment resource centre. Although it cannot solve money problems, become involved with a voluntary organisation. It helps to fill your day and brings you into contact with other people, and you are doing something worthwhile. Being in contact with other people can lead to information about jobs. Taking up meaningful distractions from drinking is a big step towards recovery.

Look up your friends

Loneliness causes anxiety and unhappiness. If you're lonely or isolated, think of how you can meet people without drinking. Are there friends you've drifted away from? Look them up again. Friends are an important support and re-establishing broken relationships is part of recovery. This may not always be successful, but where you do get a positive response from friends, value it; without them recovery is made harder. Don't cut yourself off from your friends.

Whatever the problem, heavy drinking makes the problem worse.



Change habits

When you give up one harmful habit, it's easy to replace it with another. Smokers trying to give up sometimes replace their tobacco addiction with an addiction to food. They put on weight and this gives them an excuse to start smoking again. Similarly, when you give up alcohol you may be tempted to gamble more, or to replace alcohol with tranquillisers or sleeping tablets. Each of these carries its own risks. To avoid problems, put your time and energy into more positive activities. For you, drinking alcohol is a negative activity because it is harmful to your health and your relationships. Activities such as hobbies can be enjoyed and don't lead to problems.



Part 5

The road ahead

By reading this booklet you have shown an interest in giving up alcohol. This is the beginning. It's now up to you to turn these ideas and suggestions into action that's right for you. Although change may not be easy, you can succeed.

The extent to which you succeed in becoming a non-drinker will depend largely on your willingness to plan ahead and change your lifestyle. Leave things to chance and you're likely to fall into old habits. With genuine commitment, you can be a successful non-drinker.

There is a companion booklet in this series called *Maintaining the change*. This booklet is written for you, whether your recovery is going well or not so well or hits the disastrous. A slip, a relapse, a disappointment: keep going. Pick yourself up, dust off the experience and carry on. If the going gets tough, remind yourself to take one day at a time. Winston Churchill was talking about his bouts of depression when he said, "*When going through hell... keep going.*" That can hold just as well for the low times of stopping drinking. Success will come when you have built up new interests that you enjoy and rebuilt old relationships. These will replace any gap you feel when you first stop drinking. If you continue to have problems even after putting these ideas to work, you may need some extra help. Speak to someone who understands the difficulties of becoming a non-drinker,



and you're more likely to find out where things have gone wrong. Your doctor or local alcohol and drug service should be able to help.

Never give up. Keep your eye on the person you want to be: for you, for your partner, for your children, for your grandchildren.

No matter what your problem, help is always available.



Health Promotion, Health New Zealand | Te Whatu Ora

Email: hp-enquiries@tewhatuora.govt.nz

For help contact the Alcohol Drug Helpline on **0800 787 797**

For online peer support visit **livingsober.org.nz**

To order resources visit **resources.alcohol.org.nz**