"Alcohol is tied up with many areas of our lives, and we use it in a plethora of ways: to help us relax, feel brave, introduce ourselves, seal business deals, celebrate life events, drown our sorrows, remember, forget, welcome people, say goodbye to people, get to know people, manipulate people, because we feel like it, because we need it, to numb ourselves, to feel grown up, to feel young, to belong, to distinguish ourselves, and sometimes, because we’ve forgotten how to do anything without alcohol."

Cheers? Understanding the relationship between alcohol and mental health

People with mental health problems are at an increased risk of alcohol misuse problems, and vice versa. This relationship is complex with alcohol both contributing to some psychiatric disorders, and being more common among people with mental health conditions who seek to ‘self medicate.’

The 2001 National Confidential Inquiry into Suicide and Homicide by People with Mental Illness stated that “the combination of mental illness and substance abuse is probably the greatest clinical problem facing general adult mental health services.”

There is much research that indicates that people who consume high amounts of alcohol are vulnerable to higher levels of mental ill health. According to the World Health Organisation: “Sufficient evidence now exists to assume alcohol’s contributory role in depression.”

Alcohol also exacerbates previous mental illness, for example, individuals who suffer from schizophrenia can suffer a relapse after drinking alcohol.

In the general population, individuals who indulge in considerable high levels of alcohol are at risk of developing depression and psychotic mental illness later in life. Dependence on alcohol, harmful drinking and binge drinking are associated with a significant increase of risk of dementia, and it has been predicted that there may be a disproportionate increase in alcohol-related dementia in future generations.

Alcohol consumption within the context of the family can lead to an unstable environment for children, which results in mental health problems in future generations.
Suicide and Self-Harm

There is a stark correlation between suicide and self-harm and excessive alcohol intake. Acute alcohol use is associated with suicide and alcohol dependence greatly increases the risk of suicide. This is particularly the case for people with mental health problems – in a study of people who used mental health services in Northern Ireland who died by suicide, 62% had a history of alcohol abuse\textsuperscript{vii}.

Alcohol may also play an important role in the events leading to suicide amongst individuals with no previous psychiatric history. The disinhibition produced by intoxication may prompt suicidal ideas and increases the likelihood of suicidal thoughts being put into action, often impulsively\textsuperscript{viii}. Alcohol impairs problem solving, and excessive use can lead to adverse life events\textsuperscript{x}.

Facts on links between alcohol, suicide and self-harm:

- Studies from around the world have reported a high prevalence of alcohol use disorders among people who have died by suicide\textsuperscript{v}, including a Northern Ireland study that showed 43% of suicides had used alcohol at the time of death\textsuperscript{xii}.

- Over half of men who present to hospital following an episode of deliberate self-harm have consumed alcohol in the few hours preceding the attempt, 50% regularly drink excessive amounts of alcohol and 23% are alcohol dependent\textsuperscript{xii}.

- In a report based on the National Morbidity Survey of 2000, a four fold increase in suicidal behaviour was identified among those with alcohol-related problems compared with those without such problems\textsuperscript{xiii}.

- People who are intoxicated by alcohol tend to use more lethal methods of suicide or attempt suicide using means that have a very low probability of survival\textsuperscript{xiv}.

- People who misuse alcohol who have a job are more likely to die by suicide during the weekend. This has been partly explained by the direct effect of alcohol intoxication\textsuperscript{v}.

- National suicide rates tend to rise with greater consumption of alcohol, and it has been demonstrated that reducing levels of consumption can lead to lower suicide rates.\textsuperscript{xvi} In the former USSR the political process of perestroika between 1984 to 1990 led to much stricter controls on alcohol, including substantially higher prices fewer retail outlets and reduced tolerance of public drunkenness. During this time the suicide rate fell by 32% for men and 19% for women.\textsuperscript{xvii}
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