

My Alcohol Consumption Has Increased During the Pandemic...

...Should I Be Worried?

by Laura Goossens, MSW, LCSW

The stats are in: Alcohol sales have increased 27% during the COVID-19 pandemic (Bote, 2020). Chances are you aren't surprised by this and have been seeing the memes and social media posts making light of the increase in alcohol consumption. Maybe you have even noticed an increase of alcohol use in your own life and are having some concerns. As a mental health therapist, this has been a topic in many of my therapy sessions, and I believe it's an important one to address.

What Does the Bible Say About Alcohol?

There are many different personal opinions on whether Christians should drink alcohol. I am not here to argue any of these but am more interested in creating a baseline of Bible truth to start off this conversation. The Bible states that getting drunk is a sin. Ephesians 5:18 says, "Don't be drunk with wine, because that will ruin your life. Instead, be filled with the Holy Spirit, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among yourselves, and making music to the Lord in your hearts." The Bible doesn't condemn drinking alcohol in a controlled way, but it encourages us to also consider if things that are permissible are also beneficial. 1 Corinthians 10:23 says, "You say, 'I am allowed to do anything'—but not everything is good for you. You say, 'I am allowed to do anything'—but not everything is beneficial." Alcohol is one of those things that we have to tread carefully with and consider any impact it may be making on our lives, even if we are trying to consume it in a biblical way.

Holy Spirit's Conviction

As Christians, God has given us the gift of the Holy Spirit to guide us and convict us of sin. When Jesus was talking to his disciples about the Holy Spirit being sent to them, He says "When the Helper comes, He will show the world the truth about sin. He will show the world about being right with God. And He will show the world what it is to be guilty" (John 16-8). If we are honest with ourselves, if we are already worried about an increase in alcohol consumption since the pandemic started, the Holy Spirit is probably already at work stirring up this concern within us. If there isn't peace in our spirit then we need to pray and seek the Holy Spirit's leading in our lives.

CAGE Assessment

Another way to evaluate if our drinking is getting out of control is by using the CAGE assessment. It's an evaluation that is often used to screen for substance abuse. Ask yourself the questions below, and score your answers (0=No, and 1=Yes). If you score 2 or more, you should start to make a plan to change your drinking habits, because your substance use is considered clinically significant.

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CAGE Questions

1. Have you ever felt you should cut down on your drinking?
2. Have people annoyed you by criticizing your drinking?
3. Have you ever felt bad or guilty about your drinking?
4. Have you ever had a drink first thing in the morning to steady your nerves or to get rid of a hangover (eye-opener)?

The Heart of the Issue

Sometimes there is a distortion that God is someone who sits in heaven making up a bunch of rules that are put in place to ruin any fun we want to have on earth. The truth is that God loves us so incredibly much that He doesn't want anything to steal our peace and hold us back from the abundant life He has for us. The Bible is a love letter to us intended to keep us away from Satan's schemes to steal, kill, and destroy. Over the years of being a counselor, I have seen the destruction alcohol can have in someone's life, and I can't tell you how often I have heard people say they never intended to end up where they are. There is a road to substance abuse and addiction; you don't just end up there overnight. There are opportunities you have to take control again when you feel your alcohol use is starting to spiral in a negative direction. On this road, there is also what's known as the "point of no return" where addiction occurs and feelings of hopelessness will start to creep in. My encouragement is to be aware of this and the Holy Spirit's conviction so you can make the changes you need before getting to this point. My encouragement is to also take the steps necessary to work towards recovery if you find yourself at the "point of no return." You are never too far gone; there is always hope.

Make a Change

If you feel like your alcohol use has started to head in a negative direction, why not take a break? Make a goal to set aside a time frame that you are going to go without alcohol. Maybe it's 30 days to start. Whatever time frame you decide, take the time to remove yourself from any alcohol use and to reflect on any further changes you may need to make when that time frame is up. Make a point to find other coping mechanisms and ways to relax that you can continue to use after you complete the time you have decided to go without alcohol. Coping techniques can be prayer, exercise, music, crafting, art, and anything you enjoy that can help you unwind when you are feeling stressed, overwhelmed, or lonely.

Recovery

If you try to take a break from alcohol and find that this is far more difficult than you thought it would be, and you fear you have an addiction, first seek medical help from your doctor to rule out health concerns and make a plan for safe detox. After meeting with your doctor, plan your next step to receive further help. Further help might look like finding a counselor, joining an AA group, or starting an inpatient or outpatient rehab program.

As the aftereffects of the pandemic unfold even more, we are going to continue to see an increase in alcohol abuse and addiction due to increased anxiety, unemployment rates, and isolation. I fear the full impact of this is yet to come, and I have a desire to bring awareness and encourage those who have seen a change in their drinking habits to start to take control sooner than later. I want to remind you that you are not alone, never too far gone, and today could be your day one of change. ■

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