

16 November 2020

## **Stress, anxiety and other mental health reasons drive over half of all UK drinkers to turn to alcohol during the coronavirus pandemic**

- The young, BAME people and parents suffer most
- Drinking worsened mental wellbeing for 4 in 10 drinkers
- Stigma around alcohol problems even greater than mental health stigma

A new survey for Alcohol Awareness Week (16–22 November), commissioned by charity Alcohol Change UK, shows almost one in three drinkers (29%) have been drinking at increasing or high risk levels over the past six months (over 14 units per week). Over half of drinkers (53%) said they have drunk alcohol for a mental health reason – such as feeling anxious, stressed or worried, feeling bored, having trouble sleeping, or feeling sad or low – at least once in the past six months.

Anxiety, stress or worry were the most common reasons given for drinking, with four in ten (41%) drinkers reporting this as a reason for drinking at least once in the past six months.

But while struggles with mental health led many to drink alcohol, drinking actually worsened mental health for four in ten drinkers (44%). This group have all experienced a negative impact on their mental wellbeing as a result of drinking at least once in the past six months, such as:

- Feeling anxious, stressed or worried (30%)
- Trouble getting to sleep (29%)
- Waking during the night or not sleeping well (35%)
- Memory loss (22%)
- Feeling sad or low (29%)
- Feeling irritable or angry (28%)

This close, two-way link between alcohol and mental health is the reason that this year's Alcohol Awareness Week – run by Alcohol Change UK – is focusing on **alcohol and mental health**. Over 4,000 community groups across the UK will be taking part in this year's Alcohol Awareness Week to raise awareness of the link between alcohol and mental health, to speak out about the stigma surrounding both issues, and to encourage anyone who is struggling to seek the support they deserve.

## **The impact is greatest on BAME and young people, and parents of under-18s**

Some of the inequalities seen over the course of the pandemic are reflected in people's drinking habits, for example those of young people and people from BAME backgrounds.

Six in ten (63%) people aged 18 to 34 reported drinking for a reason related to their mental health, compared to just five in ten (45%) people aged 35 to 54, and three in ten (31%) people aged 55+.

Seven in ten BAME respondents (68%) said they had drunk for a mental health reason over the past six months, compared to just four in ten (41%) people from white British backgrounds.

The survey also revealed that parents of children under the age of 18 were more likely than others to have drunk alcohol for a mental health-related reason, with almost six in ten (59%) people with children under 18 in their household reporting doing so over the past six months, compared to three in ten (32%) of those with children over the age of 18 and four in ten (42%) of those with no children.

## **Even greater stigma around alcohol problems than mental health problems**

While there has been a concerted effort to challenge the stigma around mental health problems in recent years, there's been little change in the stigma facing those with alcohol problems and their loved ones, despite the two issues being closely linked. Respondents felt more confident that they would be supported if they were to have a mental health problem than an alcohol problem, whether by family members (69% versus 62%), friends (69% versus 58%) or their employer (43% versus 25%).

Even more striking is that those surveyed were not wholly confident of support from their doctor, with just 57% expecting to be supported by their GP for their alcohol problems, compared to 69% for a mental health problem.

In order to gauge whether people have more understanding and empathy towards mental health problems than alcohol problems, the survey asked respondents to agree or disagree with a series of statements. When asked whether 'People with this problem deserve our sympathy', almost seven in ten (65%) people surveyed agreed with this statement in relation to mental health problems, but only four in ten (41%) in relation to alcohol problems.

However, when people have known someone with an alcohol problem they showed a much higher level of tolerance and sympathy. Six in ten people (61%) reported knowing or having known a friend, family member, colleague or other close acquaintance with an alcohol problem. This group were more sympathetic across the board.

- Over four in ten people (44%) who knew someone with an alcohol problem agreed with the statement 'People with alcohol problems deserve our sympathy', compared to 35% who had never known someone with an alcohol problem.

- Almost half (46%) agreed that 'We need to adopt a far more tolerant attitude towards people with drinking problems in our society' compared to only a third (36%) of people who didn't know someone with an alcohol problem.
- Six in ten people (60%) who knew someone with an alcohol problem agreed that 'we have a responsibility to provide the best possible care for people with alcohol problems', compared to five in ten people (52%) who didn't know someone with an alcohol problem.

**Dr Richard Piper**, Chief Executive of **Alcohol Change UK**, said negative attitudes towards those who are struggling with their drinking can be a huge barrier to seeking help. Calling for more open conversations around alcohol and mental health, he said:

"There remains far too much stigma around mental health, but this new survey suggests that the stigma surrounding alcohol problems runs far deeper. Stigma isn't just painful for those suffering from alcohol problems and their loved ones – it can also prevent people from getting the help they so desperately need and deserve.

"COVID-19 has negatively affected our nation's mental health, and has led millions of us to drink more heavily. Challenging the stigma and shame that many of us feel when we realise our drinking has got out of control is more important now than ever.

"This isn't a niche issue. This research shows that six in ten of us have known someone with a drinking problem. One in ten hospital inpatients is dependent on alcohol. Any of us can find ourselves drinking too much. So it's time we started talking about it: talk to your friends and family about your own and their drinking in a non-judgmental way, and ask for support if you need it. It's the bravest and best thing you can do."

For information on where to get support if you or someone you know is drinking heavily, please visit the [Alcohol Change UK website](#). This includes information about where to get support during lockdown.

For advice and information about managing your drinking during the pandemic, visit the charity's [COVID-19 and alcohol information and advice hub](#).

## Ends

## Notes to editors

## Survey

The Survey was carried out online by Opinium between 20 and 22 October 2020. Total sample size was 2,003 UK adults, of whom 1,296 said they were drinkers. The figures have been weighted and are representative of all UK adults (aged 18+).

## Alcohol Awareness Week

Alcohol Awareness Week is a chance for the UK to get thinking about drinking. It's a week of awareness raising, campaigning for change, and more. This year the week takes place from 16–22 November on the theme of Alcohol and mental health.

### Impact of COVID-19

Back in April, Alcohol Change UK reported a 355% increase in traffic to the 'Get help now' section of its website (in which the [COVID-19 hub](#) sits) compared to the same period the year before (10,499 between 23 March and 13 April 2020 compared to 2,309 in the same period in 2019).

The figures for the six-month period up to 23 September compared to the same period in 2019 are:

- Get help now: up 173% (unique page views – 50,774 vs 18,610)
- Website as a whole: up 81% (unique page views – 904,546 vs 500,202)
- Over the six-month period our website has been visited by over 500,000 people (up 86% on the same period in 2019).

It's vital that anyone who is struggling gets the support they deserve. Join in with this year's #AlcoholAwarenessWeek campaign and help drive the conversation about alcohol and mental health. Anyone can [sign up for free resources](#) to run Alcohol Awareness Week in their communities.

For information on what's happening in your community search the hashtag #AlcoholAwarenessWeek.

Find out more: [www.alcoholchange.org.uk/alcoholawarenessweek](http://www.alcoholchange.org.uk/alcoholawarenessweek)

## Alcohol Change UK

Alcohol Change UK works for a society that is free from the harm caused by alcohol. It works towards five key changes: improved knowledge, better policies and regulation, shifted cultural norms, improved drinking behaviours, and more and better support and treatment.

Find out more: [www.alcoholchange.org.uk/](http://www.alcoholchange.org.uk/)

### Contact

For interviews with Dr Richard Piper and other members of the Alcohol Change UK team, contact:

Julie Symes – [julie.symes@alcoholchange.org.uk](mailto:julie.symes@alcoholchange.org.uk) / 07848 476 873

Maddy Lawson – [maddy.lawson@alcoholchange.org.uk](mailto:maddy.lawson@alcoholchange.org.uk) / 07848 473 732