

Alcohol and Mental Wellbeing

An Evidence Summary

The relationship between alcohol and mental wellbeing is complicated. Not least because both exist on a spectrum from the occasional glass of wine to alcohol dependence, and from low mood to severe mental distress. This Evidence Summary presents insights into the relationship between alcohol use, mental distress and mental wellbeing based on published literature.

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The risk of mental distress is almost four times higher for people who drink heavily compared to those who do not



Over a third of people who report problems with alcohol experience mental distress

Alcohol consumption and mental distress are linked

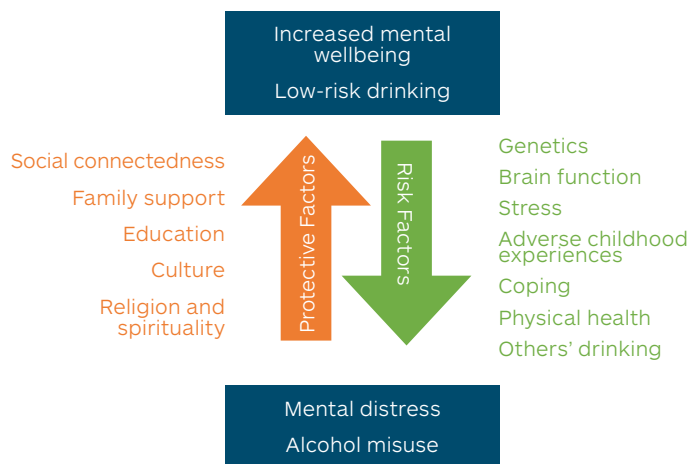
Alcohol consumption, particularly at harmful levels, is consistently linked with mental distress.

It is common to experience alcohol use problems and mental distress at the same time. For adolescents, it is more common to experience this 'dual diagnosis' than it is to experience substance use disorders on their own.

There is support for a direct pathway from alcohol misuse to depression. But generally the relationship between alcohol use and mental distress is complex, reciprocal, and not well understood. Three main pathways are debated.

Alcohol and mental distress share common risk and protective factors

Alcohol consumption and mental distress patterns vary across the life course. However, across age groups a number of risk factors increase the likelihood of both mental distress and alcohol misuse (eg, stress). Similarly, common protective factors can reduce the risk of alcohol misuse at the same time as improving wellbeing (eg, social connectedness).



Reducing alcohol consumption improves mental wellbeing

A reduction in drinking (frequency and quantity), especially among those misusing alcohol, is linked with improvements in mental wellbeing (eg, stress, anxiety, depressive symptoms, contentment, self-confidence).

In research, policy, practice and community settings, the link between alcohol consumption and mental distress needs to be acknowledged and initiatives developed to address the risk and protective factors at play. Intervening early offers opportunities to prevent long-term harms.