Cheers to better support: Alcohol awareness at work

Addressing the impact of alcohol in the workplace, and how to support colleagues

Rightsteps

Our Mission

Alcohol can quietly impact the wellbeing of employees, the performance of teams, and the overall culture of an organisation. Whether it's regular drinking, using alcohol as a tool to cope with stress, or problematic behaviours that begin to affect productivity and relationships, the impact of alcohol often extends into the workplace.

At Rightsteps, we believe that every workplace should feel equipped to understand and respond to the challenges that can arise with problematic drinking, not only to protect business continuity, but most importantly, to support the mental health and wellbeing of our teams.

As part of Turning Point, the leading social enterprise providing health and social care services across the UK, Rightsteps brings over 60 years of experience supporting individuals with substance use.

Our roots in community-based interventions, combined with our specialist expertise in workplace mental health solutions, makes us uniquely positioned to help employers navigate the sensitive, complex nature of alcohol-related issues at work.

Through person-centred therapy services and our clinically-validated digital platform - My Rightsteps Hub - we offer practical, evidence based support that empowers managers and employees to take control of their mental health and wellbeing.

In this piece, we explore the impact of alcohol use in the workplace, why it matters for your teams to be able to talk openly about alcohol, and how the right support at the right time can make all the difference.

Find out more **about Rightsteps**

Talking about alcohol in the workplace

Alcohol is woven into many aspects of life, from celebrations and networking events to winding down after a tough week. In many workplaces, it can feel like part of the culture with Friday afternoon drinks, client lunches or team socials all revolving around a glass or two. While drinking is common, talking about it openly, particularly in a work context, is often taboo.

With around 10 million people in the UK drinking at levels which could be potentially harmful, naturally the impact of alcohol can begin to seep into other aspects of our lives. When alcohol becomes a big part of someone's life or routine, it can affect how we show up to work. Over consumption in the short- to medium -term can impact our energy, focus, mood, decision-making and workplace relationships. Yet, because "a few to unwind" after a busy day is so socially accepted, we rarely pause to reflect on the role it plays in our day-to-day working lives.

84%

of work-related social events currently involve alcohol. **One in five workers** also report drinking more than they wanted due to pressure from colleagues.

HR Review and Easy Offices, 2023

Over a longer period of time, drinking can start to become problematic, affecting somebody's mental health and wellbeing. We recognise that there are often barriers when it comes to accessing support in the workplace.

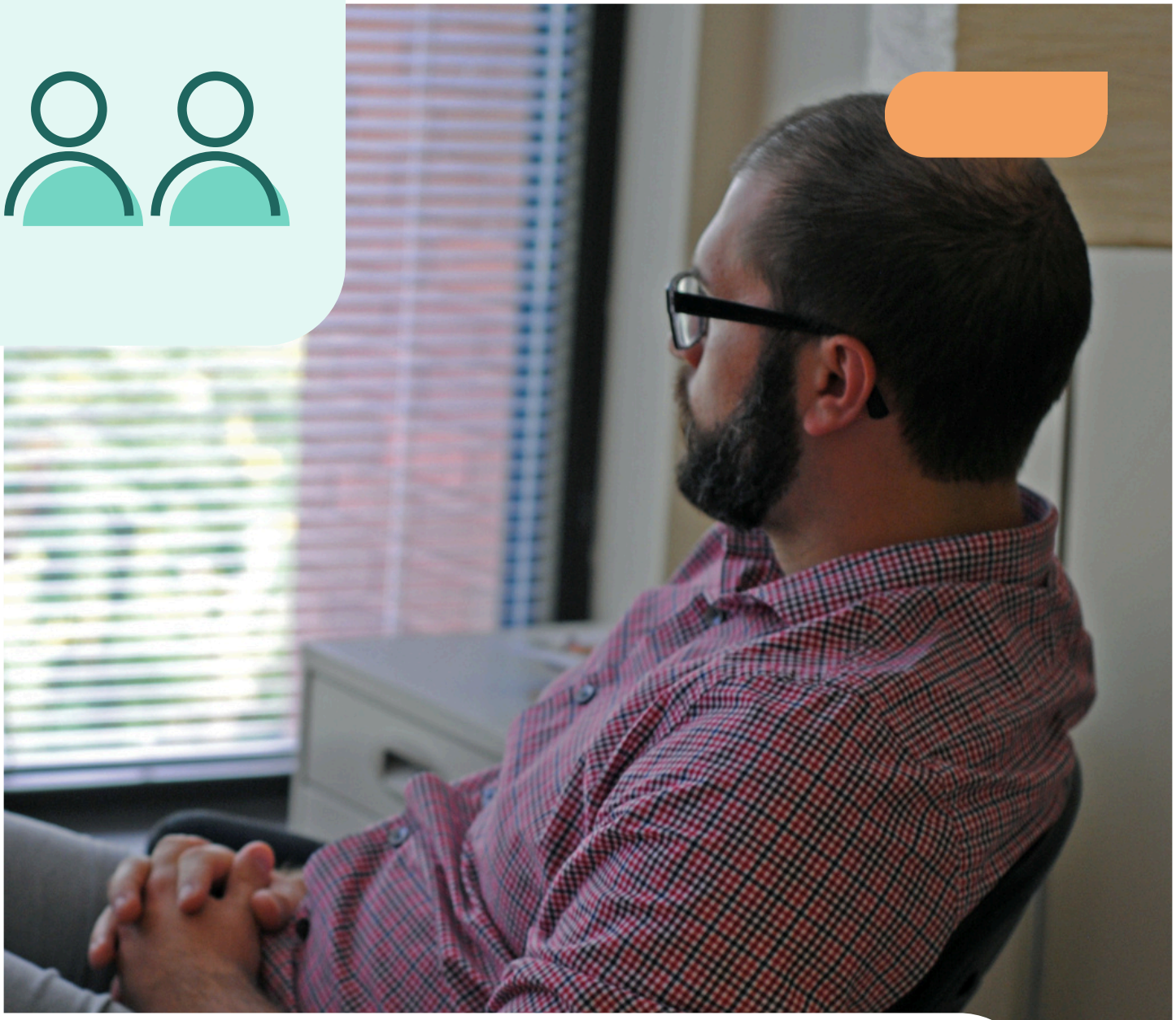
This could be due to a fear of judgement, the stigma attached to alcohol, and a lack of understanding from others.

That's why we advocate for creating space to talk about alcohol without judgement, assumptions or shame. Whether you're leading a team, supporting a colleague, or reflecting on your own habits, making conversations around alcohol feel easier and more compassionate, can help to reduce those barriers to accessing support.

30%

of workers say that they drink alcohol to relieve work-related stress.

Mental Health UK, 2023



How can alcohol impact us at work?

While the effects of alcohol vary from person to person, drinking even in small amounts can have a real impact on how we show up at work physically, mentally and emotionally. Drinking doesn't need to be excessive or problematic in order to have an impact on the way that we think, feel and function.

Concentration & Focus

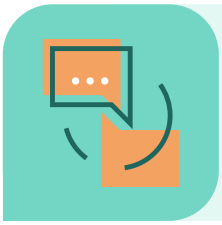
Even small amounts of alcohol can affect sleep quality and brain function the next day, leading us to feeling sluggish and forgetful or finding it difficult to concentrate. Tasks may take longer, and mistakes can creep in more easily.

Motivation & Mood

Alcohol can have an impact on our mood and energy levels. It can lower motivation, increase irritability, and increase experiences of anxiety and low mood. Over time, this can affect relationships, morale and performance at work.

Productivity & Presenteeism

Presenteeism refers to when we turn up to work feeling off, tired, or distracted. It is when we are physically present but not functioning at our best. This can quietly reduce productivity and make it harder to meet deadlines and stay engaged.



Workplace Relationships

Alcohol can shape how we interact with colleagues. Tensions might rise more quickly, patience can wear thin, and conversations may feel harder. When drinking becomes a way of coping, it may lead to withdrawal and isolation.

Absenteeism & Lateness

Frequent alcohol use can lead to higher rates of sick days and lateness due to things such as hangovers, poor sleep, illness and other alcohol related issues.

Stress & Burnout

While alcohol might provide temporary relief from stress, it can exacerbate stress levels in the long run and contribute to symptoms of burnout, making it harder to cope with workplace pressures.

Starting a conversation with colleagues

Often, it's others around us that notice changes and warning signs before we do. Ensuring you are equipped to have the conversation is the first step to creating supportive environments.

28%

of adults are concerned about someone else's drinking.

Drink Aware, 2024

Noticing that a colleague might be struggling with alcohol can be a difficult position to be in. You might be unsure whether it's your place to say something, worried about getting it wrong, or concerned you'll make things worse. But often, a gentle and compassionate conversation with someone you trust can be the first step towards accessing support.

This doesn't mean making assumptions or trying to "fix" the issue, it's simply about reaching out, showing them you're there and creating a safe space for someone to speak if they want to.

If you're worried about a colleague, but don't feel comfortable approaching them about your concerns, you may want to talk to your manager or HR in confidence to discuss the situation further instead.

If you choose to approach a conversation with colleagues about alcohol:

1. Focus on wellbeing
You don't need to mention alcohol directly if that feels too confronting. Instead, focus on what you've noticed in their wellbeing and their behaviour.

2. Pick the right moment
Try for a quiet, private setting which doesn't make them feel like they're being interrogated. This could be a walk around the park or to grab a coffee.

3. Go in with curiosity not conclusions
We never know the full extent of what someone is going through, and we don't need all the answers to help – just a willingness to listen.

4. Be prepared to listen and not solve
You're opening a door, not forcing them to walk through it.

Things to avoid

- Labelling, assuming a problem or trying to diagnose
- Talking about gossip or hearsay
- Lecturing or centring yourself

Guidance for managers

Research suggests that almost half (47%) of employees have suspected a colleague was hungover in the last 12 months and almost 1 in 5 (18%) have worked with someone they thought was under the influence of alcohol.

As a manager, it may be your responsibility to approach those trickier conversations with your team about alcohol intake and signpost to appropriate support. Supporting employees around alcohol use doesn't mean being an expert, it means being observant, acting with empathy, and understanding your role in safeguarding both the individual and the wider team.

Spotting the signs within your teams

Not everyone who struggles with alcohol will display obvious signs. However, behaviours and indicators which may warrant concern, particularly if they are persistent or escalating could include:

- Frequent lateness, especially after weekends or events
- Sudden drop in performance or productivity
- Forgetfulness, poor concentration, or making uncharacteristic errors
- Mood swings, irritability, or withdrawal from colleagues
- Avoiding responsibility or increased defensiveness
- Missed deadlines or meetings without clear reason
- Smell of alcohol on breath
- Slurred speech or unsteady movement
- Bloodshot eyes
- Unexplained fatigue
- Clumsiness or lack of coordination
- Sudden changes in appearance or hygiene
- Regular absences
- Drinking during work hours (openly or covertly)
- Avoidance of responsibilities that require clear thinking or safety
- Isolation from team
- Usually risky behaviour

Note: These signs alone do not confirm that somebody may be struggling with alcohol. Use these signs to guide supportive conversations, not as evidence of misconduct.

What to do if you're concerned

Prioritise safety

If you believe someone is under the influence at work, it's important to act quickly to ensure the safety, while remaining professional:

- Politely ask them to step away from what they're doing, particularly if the duty could cause harm (e.g. machinery, driving, caring for others)
- Do so calmly and privately
- Follow your internal policies and ensure you document the situation factually and notify those relevant (e.g. HR)

Have a private, compassionate conversation

If the concern is ongoing or less urgent, plan a conversation that's:

- Private and non-confrontational
- Focused on behaviours and wellbeing
- Framed with empathy, not accusation

Example:
"I've noticed you've seemed a bit tired and distracted lately. I've noticed a few mistakes which aren't like you. I just wanted to check in – how are things going?"

It may help to use this conversation structure:

- Observation: "I've noticed [specific behaviour]
- Impact: "It has had an affect on [team/project/wellbeing]
- Concern: I'm concerned about how you're doing"
- Support: "Is everything okay? Is there anything we can do to help?"

Know your boundaries

You're there to support and signpost, not to diagnose or dig further. Avoid asking direct questions like "do you have a drinking problem?", making assumptions, offering medical advice, or mentioning any hearsay and gossip.

Signpost to support

If the person chooses to open up and/or confide in you, thank them for their honesty and explore support options with them such as an Employee Assistance Programme (EAP) or Talking Therapies through Rightsteps.

You may want to suggest that they speak to HR, or put in place some reasonable working adjustments if needed. Once you agree on an action plan, ensure you follow up with regular check-ins. If the concern continues, follow your internal policies such as speaking to HR for formal procedures.

Creating a supportive culture

Supporting your team with proactive, rather than reactive, measures can help them to access resources sooner and get any help needed. This might include regularly reminding teams of the resources available to them, promoting open conversations around mental health, including substance use resources within wellbeing provisions and training, and leading by example.

Why the language we use matters

The words we use can shape how people feel about themselves and about seeking support. When discussing alcohol use, especially in a work setting using respectful non-judgemental language is crucial for creative a supportive and understanding culture.

64%

of UK adults feel that someone with struggles related to alcohol are not respected, while **53%** feel that they are different to everyone else.

Drink Aware, 2024

Stigmatising language in the workplace can make individuals feel ashamed or unable to seek support, pushing problems further underground and creating a culture of silence.

Using person-centred language instead, and avoiding derogatory terms, helps to reduce stigma and promote a more supportive and understanding environment.

Using person-centred language means focusing on the individual first, rather than their behaviours, experiences, or diagnoses. It acknowledges that people are more than what they are going through.

Words and phrases to avoid

The following commonly used terms or phrases carry blame, shame or judgement:

- ***Alcoholic***
- ***A drunk***
- ***Addict***
- ***Alcohol abuser***
- ***Clean / Sober***
- ***Needing help***
- ***Wino***
- ***Junkie***
- ***Problem drinker***
- ***Former addict***

There are many more terms which we may commonly hear in association with drinking. By thinking before we speak, and considering how our language could make somebody feel we can take a compassionate and understanding approach to conversations.

The Rightsteps Solution

As workplace mental health specialists, with expertise in alcohol and substance use, we are uniquely equipped to support your team with expert, clinically-validated resources and tools.

My Rightsteps Hub

Developed by our team of clinical experts, our 24/7 self service hub allows your employees immediate access to online evidence-based, psychological and psychosocial interventions, such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), as well as useful information and practical strategies for a wide range of mental health, substance use and alcohol related difficulties.

Talking Therapies

Our specialist team of in-house therapists provide a range of talking therapies that are tailored to the needs of your people. We can work with you to understand what those needs and how your team can benefit. This includes person-centred counselling, trauma support, group emotional support and cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT).

Get in touch

If you'd like to know more about Rightsteps and how we can support your organisation, get in touch now – call **0161 238 5264** or email **info@rightsteps.co.uk** to speak to our friendly team now.

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