

Preventing Problematic Alcohol Use among Police: Guidance for Law Enforcement Officers

Working in law enforcement has unique challenges, including frequent exposure to trauma. The high standards for officers regarding how they manage their stress and distress can sometimes lead to avoidant coping through using alcohol or drugs.

“It’s better for you to come to peer support and ask for help than for command staff to tell you ‘You’re getting help.’”

Officer John Hines, Peer Support Unit, Norfolk, VA, Department of Police

Suggestions for avoiding problematic alcohol use:

- **Be proactive:** Take care of your physical and emotional well-being so that you are better prepared to cope with stress and trauma.
- **Maintain your self-care routine:** Keep hobbies, social activities, and physical exercise integrated into your life in ways that work for you.
- **Stay engaged with other people:** Keep up social connections with friends and family, inside and outside your agency.
- **Seek support:** Ask for support from friends, family, peers, supervisors, and/or professionals when you are having a hard time.
- **Learn about resources:** Keep up with resources your department or local agencies may offer to support officers who are struggling.
- **Recognize warning signs:** Learn your own signs of stress and warning signs that alcohol use may be becoming problematic.

How can I know if my drinking has become problematic?

Answer the following questions:¹

- Have you ever felt a need to cut down on your drinking?
- Have people ever expressed concern about your drinking?
- Have you ever felt guilty about drinking?
- Have you ever felt you needed a drink first thing in the morning to steady your nerves or get rid of a hangover?

- Have you ever felt your personal or professional life has been negatively affected by your drinking?
- Have you routinely called in sick due to impairment or hangovers?

If you answered “yes” to two or more of these questions, consider talking with a medical or mental health provider about your drinking.

How can I talk with a colleague or friend who may have a problem?

- **Let them know that you are concerned about them.**
- **Use observable behavior:** Share examples of your concerns, but reserve judgement.
- **Speak with the person privately:** Make sure the conversation is as secure as possible.
- **Offer resources:** Provide information about available treatment and support options.
- **Encourage help-seeking:** Let your colleague know you want to help. Encourage the person to talk with a professional about their difficulties. If needed, offer to help them find a qualified professional.
- **Follow up:** Check in again with your colleague to see how they are and whether they have followed up on resources you discussed. Ask how you can help and support them.

¹ Adapted from: JA Ewing “Detecting Alcoholism: The CAGE Questionnaire” JAMA 252: 1905-1907, 1984.

Resources:

Cop2Cop: Helpline staffed 24/7 by trained, retired law enforcement officers: **1-800-267-2267**

SAMSHA National Helpline: 24/7 resources and support: **1-800-662-4357**

COPLINE: Helpline staffed 24/7 by trained, retired law enforcement officers: **1-800-267-5463**

First Help: Helps first responders connect with local resources: <http://www.1sthelp.net/>

Safe Call Now: 24/7 support from other first responders: **206-459-3020**

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For more officer wellness resources
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osw@theiacp.org



theIACP.org/OSW



[800.THE.IACP](tel:800.THE.IACP)