Script – Print – Drinking the COVID Blues Away
Studies Show Alcohol Use is Up Due to Pandemic

For the past two years, people have found a number of ways to cope with the stress that comes with living through a pandemic, and that includes alcohol use.

A recent online survey conducted by The Harris Poll on behalf of Alkermes, Inc., discovered that 17 % of respondents over the age of 21 revealed drinking patterns that met the criteria for heavy drinking, which was defined as having two heavy drinking days in one week at least twice in the previous 30 days.

In another poll conducted by Ria Health, an online alcohol addiction treatment program, found that drinking among women – especially younger women – has drastically increased during the pandemic due to a variety of reasons including isolation, work-related stress and parenting.

Loni Nolte is a behavioral health provider for OSF HealthCare. She says these problems are common among some of the clients she works with on a regular basis.

"More often than not a woman gets very quiet when she's upset," says Nolte. "They pull in within themselves. They are less demonstrative, they isolate, and they get heavier in their thoughts like, 'I'm not doing something right,' and like anyone, we're going to have to find a way to relieve that. And if you don't have healthy support systems or coping mechanisms in place, you're going to go to something that is well known. You turn on most shows on TV and there is drinking. It's very acceptable."

Nolte has seen a particular increase in drinking among college-aged women. College, she says, is typically a time where young women experiment with drinking anyway. Now throw a pandemic on top of that, along with remote learning and the cancellation or postponement of other enjoyable activities, and college-aged women are feeling more alone and isolated and turning to alcohol.

"If someone tells me they're drinking every night of the week, I'm concerned," she says. "I don't like anyone to be that dependent on anything. We need variety to keep us stimulated and balanced. Definitely frequency. I look for how much they're drinking. If it's a little bit versus I'm finishing the bottle or I don't know how many or I'm hiding. Secrets lead to all kinds of other issues. If we're hiding we're not being honest with ourselves or the people who can help us and that's important."

According to the Harris Poll survey, several respondents who reported heavy drinking admitted to feeling negative mental, physical and psychosocial impacts during the past year. Three in 10 respondents said they continued to drink even though it made them feel depressed or anxious. And 23% gave up or cut back on activities that were important or interesting to them in order to drink.

"When you're avoiding things or when you're not able to make it through the day or find yourself sick, when you're hiding, when there are legal consequences or consequences at work – all of those are big signs that we need to pay attention to," says Nolte. "Alcoholism is a really dangerous disease. It impacts not just the person but also their family. It can be very chronic."

Nolte suggests finding a support person to help hold you accountable for your actions. A good place to start is your medical provider or someone else who knows you well. Other suggestions include journaling, getting out for a run or walk, and deep breathing exercises. Most importantly, find activities that you enjoy or make you feel good about yourself.

"This is a real problem. It can happen to anyone. It's important to not look at this as a source of shame," Nolte adds. "Understand that many times when people are turning to alcohol or some other substance, they are trying desperately to fix themselves; they're just not making a good choice so it's important to find help where it may come from – a trusted friend, an expert. Get the help you need so this becomes a blip on the radar, a small setback, and you can move forward with your life, with your future."

For more information about alcohol use, visit OSF HealthCare.