

15 Signs of a High-Functioning Alcoholic

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As a country, we saw the rate of alcohol use increase 14 percent during the pandemic. Online alcohol sales increased 234 percent. Combine the isolation experienced from quarantining with the convenience of alcohol delivery and we saw many people experience periods of increased alcohol use beyond their normal patterns. For some, these became dependent patterns.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommends adults should limit drinking in one day to two drinks or less for men or one drink or less for women. The CDC defines binge drinking as consuming four or more alcoholic beverages per occasion for women and five or more for men.

While no one should be quick to judge, it might be surprising to learn a loved one could be struggling with an alcohol use disorder (AUD). If you do not know what to look for, their behavior might lead you to believe they are just tense or stressed.

A high-functioning alcoholic, also known as a functional alcoholic, is someone who can hold down a steady job, dress well, and socialize effortlessly without drawing attention to their drinking problem. People who are high-functioning alcoholics also have difficulty admitting that they have a drinking problem.

So how do you detect a high-functioning alcoholic? You or someone you know may be struggling with AUD if you notice they:

We all feel the stresses of work, family, and social life. How we deal with that stress varies greatly. To relax after a long day, some may find it natural to reach out for a glass of wine or beer. But at what point does your evening drink shift from an innocent routine to an unhealthy addiction?

1. Use alcohol as a coping mechanism.

If someone drinks as a coping mechanism, it is usually a sign that they have a problem with alcohol. If they often drink after a stressful day at work, or dealing with relationship problems, it could indicate that they have developed a more serious problem.

High-functioning alcoholics who drink regularly are often drinking to numb the uncomfortable feelings that accompany stressful situations. Just a few drinks to take the edge of a stressful day could signal the early stages of a serious drinking habit.

2. Impose limits on their drinking.

Another sign that someone is a high-functioning alcoholic is when they impose limits on their drinking when socializing. For example, they might say, "I'm only drinking beer tonight." This tactic is used to convince themselves that they are in control of their alcohol use, even if they're not concerned about what others think.

3. Get drunk without intending to.

If someone gets drunk without intending to, this circumstance is a sure sign they could be a functional alcoholic. The person thinks that their drinking does not affect their behavior, and that having just a few drinks is a means of relaxation. But, if they drink regularly and get drunk without intending to, one drink is never the end. It typically leads to more – until it is past the point of no return.

4. Associate with other drinkers.

High-functioning alcoholics tend to mix socially with friends who also like to drink. They are likely to associate with people who hold parties where alcohol is the focus.

Functional alcoholics pride themselves on not drinking during the day or by attending family functions sober. But put them in a social situation that is centered on alcohol, and you might find they are right in the thick of the action.

5. Engage in risky behavior.

High-functioning alcoholics frequently engage in risky behaviors like drunk driving, spontaneous sexual encounters, getting into fights, or drinking while looking after their children.

6. Practice self-isolation.

Self-isolation is harder to spot than some of the other signs listed here. People who appear to be in control socially may tend to spend time alone in a bar or at home going through bottles of wine, whiskey, or beer. High-functioning alcoholics may also prevent people from coming to their home out of fear their drinking habits become apparent.

7. Use any occasion as an excuse to drink.

Whether it is an office happy hour or a night out, high-functioning alcoholics use any excuse to have a drink. The problem is, this drinking pattern can easily escalate to having an excuse at any time, from going to sleep to trying to calm down after an argument. Even moderate drinking at inappropriate times can be a sign of a functional alcoholic.

8. Exhibit a split personality.

An alcoholic tends to have mood swings that can escalate to dramatic, severe personality changes.

A high-functioning alcoholic can appear sober sometimes and drunk at others. They might normally present as a reliable and steady character but become suddenly unreasonable and hysterical. This behavior can take its toll in the long run; gradually, the highs and lows become more pronounced.

9. Experience frequent bouts of irritability.

Someone who depends on alcohol can become twitchy and argumentative when they are sober. When the effects of the alcohol wear off, an alcoholic often has increased anxiety and becomes irritable.

10. Are often in denial.

A high-functioning alcoholic will seldom admit that they have a problem. Alcoholics do not want to lose their favorite drink, much less admit they might be out of control. When their concerned loved ones approach them about the amount they drink, they might downplay the amount they are consuming.

11. Grow angry quickly.

It is practically impossible to approach an alcoholic about their drinking without provoking an angry reaction. If challenged, they might lash out.

12. Don't seem to experience hangovers.

Functional alcoholics can drink, pass out, and then get up for work if they are used to drinking high volumes over a long period of time. Because they know how to cope with hangovers – if they experience them at all – alcoholics tend to drink more than non-alcoholics.

13. Memory is often poor.

Drinking excessively on a consistent basis increases the likelihood of blackouts. If the person reacts angrily to family members while they are drunk, they may not remember the next day. They will probably deny that they did anything wrong and react with anger to the accusation. Not being accountable for their actions is probably one of the worst traits of a high-functioning alcoholic.

14. Hide their alcohol.

A common trait of high-functioning alcoholics is that they tend to hide their supply of alcohol. Keeping alcohol away from the eyes of others is a classic sign of a high-functioning alcoholic.

15. Separate their lives from alcohol.

Functional alcoholics tend to compartmentalize their lives. On one hand, they lead normal everyday lives. On the other hand, they have drinking lives where they feel they can be a totally different person.

WHAT TO DO (AND NOT DO) IF YOUR LOVED ONE IS AN ALCOHOLIC

Before taking any firm steps to confront a loved one you suspect is an alcoholic, do your due diligence. Don't rush it, but remember it is imperative to take action.

Do: Approach them with kindness, rather than blaming or shaming.

Rather than telling your loved one outright, "You're an alcoholic and you need to sort it out," ask yourself if you can make a similar statement that is less confrontational. Try to plan in advance how you will remain calm, regardless of their response.

If instead you say something like, "I love you, and I'm so concerned about the way drinking might be harming you and your health." You are communicating your concern in a way that is far less likely to provoke a negative reaction.



CONTINUED ON PAGE 24

15 Signs of a High-Functioning Alcoholic

Don't: Blame yourself.

None of this is your fault. Try not to project your feelings onto the person you're trying to help. If your loved one reacts poorly, or suggests they only drink excessively because of something you're doing wrong, ignore this; they are their own person, and it is their choice to drink. Remove any blame from yourself.

Do: Listen closely and be supportive.

This step might be tough if you have lots you want to get off your chest but try your best to listen to what the person has to say. Once you have initiated the conversation, be prepared for your loved one to be in denial. This situation is common. Give the person time to think about what you have said, and let them know you will support them when they are ready to seek help.

Don't: Enable their behavior.

When you deny or minimize your loved one's behavior, you make it easier for them to continue drinking. In other

words, you are enabling them. Allow your loved one to own up to the consequences of their alcoholism rather than shielding them from any negative consequences. This action is not easy, but it is loving.

Do: Remember to find help for yourself, too.

If a close friend or family member is struggling with alcoholism, chances are this will have an impact on you as well. It is so important that you look after your own physical and mental health in order to avoid codependency and stay accountable for things that are actually in your own control.

Don't: Be afraid to seek help for your loved one.

You do not have to have all the answers! One of the best things you can do is encourage your loved one to seek help through residential or intensive outpatient treatment, both of which will connect them with an addiction specialist and supportive community through Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) or SMART Recovery.

People struggling with alcohol abuse may be able to cut back on their drinking habits, while others may require additional support. Some may not even realize they have a drinking problem. It is important to seek out support. Underlying issues often contribute to alcohol abuse. Working with licensed professionals can help guide the person on their road to recovery and provide the tools to sustain a healthier lifestyle.

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