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MONTHLY WELL-BEING THEME RESOURCE GUIDE: APRIL 2022

ALCOHOL AWARENESS

April is [National Alcohol Awareness Month](#) in the U.S., which IWIL Programming has adopted as its April 2022 well-being theme. Alcohol Awareness Month encourages events and activities that increase awareness and educate people about the treatment and prevention of problematic drinking and alcohol use disorders. This Resource Guide provides information and resources that you can use individually, as a team, or to support organization-wide education or activities to better understand problematic drinking and what to do about it.

Note: This guide is for information purposes only and should not be taken as legal or medical advice.

CURBING DRINKING CULTURE

Do Law Firm Happy Hours Really Support Our Health & Happiness?

By Anne Brafford, March 31, 2022

Problematic Drinking in the Legal Profession

It's not news that lawyers may be prone to risky drinking. A [2016 study](#) based on surveys of 12,825 practicing lawyers from across the U.S. found that 21% of participants qualified as problem drinkers (Krill et al., 2016). Problematic drinking was particularly high for lawyers under age 30 (especially men) in junior and senior associate positions at private firms. Participants who were problematic drinkers were much more likely to have higher symptoms of depression, anxiety, and stress.

Further, a 2020 study of binge-drinking by occupation found that the legal occupation had the second highest prevalence of binge-drinking (23.9%)—though, fortunately, rated lower than average in frequency of binge-drinking and number of drinks consumed while binge-drinking (Shockey & Esser, 2020). In other words, while many lawyers binge, they don't do it that often (at least comparatively).

[Data from the National Health Interview Survey](#) suggests that risky drinking among lawyers might not be as high as found in the ABA/Hazelden Betty Ford study (Listokin & Noonan, 2020). But few doubt that too many lawyers engage in risky drinking that can potentially harm their professional performance and well-being. Given lawyers' special duty of competence and enormous level of responsibility, risky drinking should be taken seriously in the legal profession.

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Risky Alcohol Use: A Nation-Wide Concern

Problematic drinking is not limited to lawyers or the legal profession. A 2017 study found a dramatic rise in risky alcohol use and alcohol use disorders (AUDs) across the U.S. across all demographics—causing medical professionals to warn of a “public health crisis” that echoes the opiate epidemic ([Grant et al., 2017](#); [Schuckit, 2017](#)).

Pandemic Drinking

Many reports have warned that drinking has been on the rise during the COVID pandemic (e.g. [Cappaso et al., 2021](#); [Hampton, 2022](#); [Pollard et al., 2020](#)). Some scholars point out that this trend is not universally true across the country—the pandemic has struck people differently, with some reducing alcohol consumption ([Radcliff, 2021](#)). And, notably, increased alcohol use during times of stress doesn’t equate to an alcohol use disorder, but it may be a precursor to one (Cappaso et al., 2021).

“Gray Area” Drinking

“Gray area” drinking is a term that refers to a realm between nonproblematic levels of alcohol consumption and a diagnosed alcohol use disorder (Radcliffe, 2021). Gray area drinking is not a medical diagnosis but it can impact people’s work and health. Increasing alcohol use may indicate an unhealthy pattern of coping with stress, which is associated with problematic drinking (Cappaso et al., 2021).

Drinking On The Rise for Women—including Women Lawyers

Pandemic drinking rose especially among women (e.g., [Hauck, 2021](#); Pollard et al., 2020; [Tingley, 2021](#))—which continued a pre-pandemic pattern (e.g., Pollard et al., 2020; [Sugarman & Greenfield, 2021](#)). Similarly, a recent study of D.C. and California lawyers spotlighted problematic drinking for women during the pandemic ([Anker & Krill, 2021](#)). It found that a significantly greater proportion of women compared to men engaged in risky drinking (55.9% vs. 46.4%) and high risk/hazardous drinking (34.0% vs. 25.4%).

D.C. and California—with their big metropolitan areas—may have been especially hard-hit by the pandemic, so it’s not clear whether this pattern is consistent across the country. It’s also unclear why the pandemic has had a bigger impact on women’s drinking, but it’s likely a combination of factors like their extra child-care burden, home-schooling (Tingley, 2021), and the rise of the “[Mommy Wine Culture](#).”

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Taking Action

What can the legal profession do in response to problematic drinking? The 2021 lawyer study in D.C. and California provides some guidance (Anker & Krill, 2021). It found that a primary predictor of risky drinking was workplace permissiveness toward alcohol. Permissiveness was measured by questions asking, for example, how frequently you've gone drinking with colleagues off the job, how much of talk at work is about drinking-related activities, and how often you're expected to drink to celebrate something at work.

The study's finding is consistent with much other research finding that workplace drinking norms can powerfully influence whether and how much people drink (Bacharach et al., 2002; Neighbors et al., 2007; Patel & Fromme, 2010) and can predict problem drinking even more so than stress ([Hodgins et al., 2009](#)).

How Workplace Drinking Norms Are Formed

Work-related norms are formed by watching what other firm members do and say—especially high-status members, like partners. People continually scan for cues about what behaviors are expected, valued, discouraged, or condemned, and are influenced (often outside their awareness) to act accordingly.

Studies have found, for example, that liberal peer drinking norms are significantly related to employees' use of alcohol to unwind after work and problematic drinking. For example, where such norms prevail, employees' experience of work-life conflict is more strongly related to alcohol use (Patterson et al., 2005; Wang et al., 2010).

Drinking norms can apply to a whole firm, but also can apply at department, team, and even interpersonal levels. Changing firms' drinking norms is a matter of changing entrenched workplace cultures at all of these levels—which is not easy. But it is something that firms actually have some control over. And it may be the most important determinant for the long-term success of alcohol use disorder prevention programs (Ames et al., 2000; Neighbors et al., 2007).

Shaping Healthy Norms: Implementing a Responsible Drinking Policy

To get some expert advice on what firms can do to reshape their drinking norms, I interviewed Dr. Michael E. Dunn, PhD, who is an associate professor at University of Central Florida who leads the Health, Expectancies & Addiction Laboratory (HEAL). In his view, an essential step in developing responsible drinking norms is to clearly state the firm's expectations about drinking alcohol in a well-communicated and enforced policy.

At every firm, there already are established, often unspoken norms that form their drinking culture. Because unspoken permissive drinking norms will contribute to firm members' problematic drinking and undesirable behaviors, firms should consider explicitly articulating acceptable drinking boundaries in a written policy and/or as part of well-being programming.

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Policies should do more than ambiguously recommend “responsible drinking” and safety precautions (e.g., don’t drive if drinking), which can be loosely interpreted as supporting existing social norms (Hessari & Petticrew, 2017). Policies should provide explicit expectations and recommendations for drinking alcohol at work-related events that align with well-being and professionalism goals (Fernandes, 2018).

Download a Free Policy Template

Get started shaping responsible drinking norms by tailoring the free [Alcohol Use Policy Template for Legal Employers](#) to your organization.

Other Strategies For Reshaping Drinking Norms

Additional strategies for reshaping drinking norms include:

- 1. Good role modeling.** Organizational support for healthy drinking guidelines should include visible support from firm leaders (Cook et al., 2003). Firm members will look to partners and other leaders for cues about firm drinking norms. Firm efforts to encourage healthier habits will stall if high-status members model unhealthy drinking behaviors or mock drinking guidelines.
- 2. Team training.** Drinking norms are established and enforced by social patterns, and so training about responsible alcohol use is likely to be most effective if it targets established social networks (Kolar & von Treuer, 2015; Bennett et al., 2000).
- 3. Alternative social activities.** Some people drink for enjoyment or because they think it helps them be more social. Creating alternative ways to serve these purposes may help change drinking norms. Many law firms already are using this strategy. Examples include:
 - Diversifying when and where firm events are held
 - Limiting “happy hour” events and re-branding them as “social hours”
 - Holding breakfast and lunch meetings and events
 - Planning activity-based events, e.g., cooking classes, trivia nights, bowling, book clubs
 - Increasing service-based activities, such as volunteering at food banks, building homes with Habitat for Humanity, or partnering with a local charity
 - Having events that make non-alcoholic options more attractive, such as offering specialty “mocktails” with firm-tailored names, focusing on food or healthy beverages (e.g., taco stands, ice cream socials, smoothie or juice bars), and providing gourmet coffee options (see Buchanan & Beitner, 2020).

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Provide Training That Targets Drinking Motives and Expectations and Coping Skills

Training to support changes to individual behavior and culture norms also may be helpful. Targeting drinking motives and expectations as well as coping skills may be especially helpful.

How firm members think about alcohol plays a big role in why and how they use it. People have a variety of motives for drinking and corresponding expectation about alcohol's effects including, for example, to feel social, to reduce tension, to have fun, or to fit in. Examples of many possible motives for drinking are provided in this [self-reflection exercise](#) (courtesy of Jarrett Green). The way we think about drinking is linked to alcohol use and alcohol-related problems.

For example, moderate or lighter drinkers are more likely to say that they drink for social reasons. Moderate drinkers consume alcohol occasionally to enhance positive emotional states, like celebrating a victory or attending a happy hour at the end of the week.

On the other hand, when people drink to relieve negative emotional states (e.g., drinking to cope, to sleep, etc.), they are at the highest risk for problematic drinking.

Therefore, coping motives and expectations should be specially targeted in prevention programming (Mohr et al., 2018; Patel & Fromme, 2010; Shepherd, 2019). Consider training to:

- Raise awareness about why people drink and alternative options for achieving the same goals.
- Build coping skills. Some people drink to cope with stress. Providing programs to develop more healthy ways to cope can help (Bravo et al., 2020; Mohr et al., 2018; Norman et al., 2014).. The most effective programs typically are based on cognitive-behavioral therapy principles, which teach people do have a healthier relationship with their thoughts and emotions.
- Educate members on alternative ways to unwind after work (Cook et al., 2003; Patterson et al., 2005).

Conclusion

Legal employers are in a unique position to support workforce well-being, including curbing problematic drinking. It's important to be proactive to protect lawyers' professional competence and the well-being and functioning of all firm members so that firms and their members can thrive together.

Note: Portions of this article are excerpts from Anne Brafford's *Workplace Well-Being Handbook for Employers* available on [IWIL's website](#).

RESOURCES FOR YOU (INDIVIDUALS)

- [Take a Self-Assessment Test to Determine If You Have Drinking Problem](#) (2021). VeryWellMind.com. By recognizing when your drinking habits have become potentially harmful, you can take steps to address them before they cause more damage to your life.
- [Self-Reflection: Why Do You Drink?](#) How you think about alcohol plays a big role in why and how you use it. Examples of many possible motives for drinking are provided in this self-reflection exercise, courtesy of Jarrett Green.
- [‘Gray Area Drinking’ Is More Common Than You Think—And It’s Treatable](#) (2021). VeryWellHealth.com. Even if a person does not have an alcohol use disorder, emotional drinking can be a habitual and unhealthy activity, sometimes referred to as “gray area drinking.”
- [What Does It Mean to Be Sober Curious?](#) (2021). VeryWellMind.com. Do you often wonder what life would be like without alcohol? Do you question why alcohol is present at every event? Do you hate the all-or-nothing mentality that comes with sobriety? Sober curiosity might be for you.
- [Breaking The Booze Habit, Even Briefly, Has Its Benefits](#) (2019). NPR.com. The “sober curious” movement has spread across the U.S., with people challenging each other to see what life is like without alcohol and share in that experience.
- [Overcoming Alcohol Addiction](#). Help Guide. Are you ready to quit drinking or cut down to healthier levels? These tips can help you get started on the road to recovery.
- [Binge Drinking: Effects, Causes, and Help](#). Help Guide. If you have trouble stopping drinking once you start, these tips can help you build a healthier relationship with alcohol.
- [How to Stay Sober: 13 Tips for Your Recovery](#). VeryWellMind.com. This article discusses what sobriety means and describes strategies that can support your long-term recovery. It also covers tips on how to deal with the challenges you’ll face on your journey to sobriety.
- [16 Expert Tips For Reducing Your Alcohol Consumption](#) (2021). Forbes.com. How to know when it’s time to cut back and 16 ways to help you do so.
- [How to Maintain a Social Life When You’re Quitting Drinking](#) (2020). VeryWellMind.com. Being sober doesn’t have to mean giving up your social life, yet managing sobriety in a social setting (especially when alcohol is involved) can be a bit of a challenge. Having a plan can help you enjoy going out after you’ve quit drinking.
- [How Keeping a Journal Can Help You Stay Sober](#) (2019). Growing evidence supports the use of holistic care in the recovery process, since the underlying cause of addiction is often linked to mental health struggles. Journaling is one holistic self-care strategy that can help keep you accountable and on the right track.

RESOURCES FOR YOU (INDIVIDUALS)

- [The Best Alcohol Addiction Recovery Apps](#) (2021). Healthline.com. There's no substitute for treatment for alcohol use disorders. But finding support in an app can offer daily reinforcement and accountability. Healthline chose 11 apps based on their high-quality content, reliability, and positive user reviews.
- [Online Therapy: Is it Right for You?](#) Whether you're seeking psychotherapy for stress, relationship difficulties, bereavement, depression, anxiety, or another mental health problem, online counseling or teletherapy may be an effective solution. Here's what you need to know. Help Guide.
- [Best Online Sobriety Support Groups](#) (2021). Sobriety support groups are aimed at those looking to manage alcohol addiction or substance abuse. The groups may be faith-based or secular, promote abstinence or moderation, meet in-person or online, and involve structured coaching and programs or only understanding and support. The article recommends seven options for online support groups.
- [The Alcohol Experiment](#). The Alcohol Experiment is a 30-day challenge designed to help you interrupt your drinking-related habits and take control. It seeks to lower barriers by asking the simple question - "would my life be happier if I was drinking less?" The program is led by Annie Grace, author of the popular, evidence-based self-help book, [This Naked Mind: Control Alcohol, Find Freedom, Discover Happiness & Change Your Life](#). Her website offers a free downloadable eBook, [Six Vital Things You Need to Know About Moderation \(According to Science\)](#).

RESOURCES TO HELP YOU SUPPORT OTHERS

- [How to Be Supportive When a Friend Is Giving Up Booze](#) (2019). ABC.net. When someone makes the decision to change their drinking patterns, it's important that others respect and accept their decision.
- [Helping Someone with a Drinking Problem](#). Help Guide. Dealing with a loved one's alcohol abuse or alcoholism can be painful and challenging for the whole family, but there is help available.
- [It's OK That I Don't Drink. It's Not OK That You Ask Why](#) (2020). Stop being the alcohol police. Huffpost.com.
- [#StopSoberShaming Campaign](#). AlcoholChange.org. Sober shaming is making someone feel uncomfortable for not drinking. Not drinking alcohol—whether for an evening, a month, or long-term—should be a decision we can all make freely, that others respect. When we sober shame, we make that decision much harder, and contribute a culture where drinking is the default, not a choice. This website recommends some things we can do to help stop sober shaming and be a good ally to those who have decided, for whatever reason, not to drink.

RESOURCES FOR WORKPLACES

Signs & Consequences of Problematic Drinking By Employees

- [The Signs and Effects of Drinking at Work & How to Address Them](#) (2021). This article covers the signs and effects of alcohol misuse in the workplace, preventing and addressing alcohol misuse in the workplace, and treatment options for employees.
- [Effects of Alcohol Abuse in the Workplace](#) (2021). What to do if you encounter someone who is struggling with alcohol abuse in your workplace.

Changing Drinking Culture in Workplaces

- **Download a Free Policy Template.** Workplace culture strongly influences employee drinking patterns. Get started shaping responsible drinking norms by tailoring the free [Alcohol Use Policy Template for Legal Employers](#) to your organization.
- [How to Identify if Your Workplace Has an Unhealthy Drinking Culture](#) (2021). MindBeacon.com. Socializing over alcohol is a common social activity in workplaces. A drink during a Friday meeting, drinks after work, happy hours, wine nights, and Zoom cocktail classes have all become popular ways of keeping employees engaged within the firm. But, is your workplace contributing to a drinking culture that is unhealthy? This article offers some indicators that it may be so.
- [Avoiding a Workplace Drinking Culture](#) (2021). RealBusiness.com. The use of alcohol in the workplace can create a toxic environment for everyone. This article discusses what can be done to lower the involvement that alcohol and drinking culture have within workplaces and work social events.
- [When Your Drinking Has a Culture Problem: Booze-Based Socialising at Work](#). Juggle.jobs. If your company relies on alcohol to drive socialising then your company doesn't have a drinking problem, it has a culture problem.

OTHER RESOURCES

Legal Assistance Programs

Lawyer Assistance Programs (LAPs) throughout the country provide confidential services and support to judges, lawyers, and law students who are facing issues with problematic drinking as well as other mental health and substance use issues. If you or someone you know is in need of assistance, you are encouraged to contact your state or local LAP. To find the LAP in your jurisdiction, click on [this link](#) for a directory provided by the ABA Commission on Lawyer Assistance Programs.

OTHER RESOURCES

Books

- This Naked Mind: Control Alcohol by Annie Grace
- Euphoric: Ditch Alcohol and Gain a Happier, More Confident You by Karolina Rzadkowska
- Alcohol Explained by William Porter
- Dopamine Nation: Finding Balance in the Age of Indulgence by Anna Lembke
- We Are the Luckiest: The Surprising Magic of a Sober Life by Laura McKowen
- Quit Like a Woman: The Radical Choice to Not Drink in a Culture Obsessed with Alcohol by Holly Whitaker
- Blackout: Remembering the Things I Drank to Forget by Sarah Hepola
- Between Breaths: Elizabeth Vargas

Podcasts

- This Naked Mind
- Recovery in the Middle Ages

AUTHORS

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