

Alcohol Use among First Responders during COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic is proving to be one of the most prolonged and serious stressors facing our first responders in almost a century. First responders are on the frontlines of the pandemic, encountering the threat of possible exposure to the virus regularly and on an ongoing basis while providing healthcare, protection, and support to our communities. As a result, first responders may not be able to reunite with their families after long shifts but instead self-quarantine to keep their families safe. Health anxiety, financial stress, relationship disruptions, and ongoing exposure to COVID-related potentially traumatic events (e.g., death, serious injury) can create a perfect stress storm that can feel difficult to handle, even for the most seasoned first responders.

The stress of long, hard days on the job, separations from family, self-isolation, and worry about contracting or transmitting the virus to family or loved ones can take a toll. Decades of research have shown that first responders drink alcohol at higher rates than the general population. For example, approximately one-half of firefighters are estimated to meet criteria for an alcohol use disorder, compared to less than 30% of the general population¹⁻³. First responders report drinking alcohol to cope with stress and to socialize or feel closer to others⁴⁻⁵. Alcohol may seem like a viable and reliable remedy after a long day of anxiety and stress, especially as first responders increasingly find themselves alone after shifts, socially distancing away from friends and family after-hours. Isolation and stress can lead to exacerbations in anxiety and depressed mood.

However, relying on alcohol use to “take the edge off” difficult emotions, reduce anxiety, or cope with negative emotions can lead to alcohol use disorder and other mental health problems in the long-term. Alcohol use problems rarely occur alone and often co-exist with anxiety, depression, or traumatic stress. In fact, people who report alcohol use problems also often report another mood or anxiety related syndrome. First responders who find themselves relying on alcohol on a daily basis, regularly drinking to cope with stress, drinking and engaging in potentially hazardous activities (e.g., driving, operating machinery), or excessive drinking (i.e., an average of 3 or more drinks per occasion) are encouraged to seek help immediately. First responders who reach out for help can gain new coping strategies and perspectives, improve ways of communicating with friends, co-workers, and significant others, and learn more about how to recover from chronic stress or trauma in a healthy way.



SAMHSA's National Helpline – [1-800-662-HELP \(4357\)](tel:1-800-662-HELP)

SAMHSA's National Helpline is a free, confidential, 24/7, 365-day-a-year treatment referral and information service (in English and Spanish) for individuals and families facing mental and/or substance use disorders.

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