

# When Drinking Crosses the Line

April is Alcohol Awareness Month

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**A**lcohol, a powerful, mood-altering substance which acts as a depressant on the central nervous system, has been part of human society since the beginning of civilization. In our culture, drinking has become synonymous with good times and celebrations. Social media plays an instrumental role in normalizing excessive drinking.

Our youth, especially college students, experience higher levels of social pressure to drink. Alcohol consumption on college campuses is more common and destructive than most people realize. Unfortunately, it is considered a rite of passage for many college students to drink, and drink heavily. This toxic and dangerous drinking culture has been swept under the rug far too long.

Since the start of the pandemic, the use of it has increased as people battle isolation and stress. Lori McCarthy, executive director of the Herren Wellness Recovery Center in Warrenton, says, “The pandemic exposed the use and misuse of alcohol. Young adults and college students were the first group to surface with substance struggles. Dads were next, followed by moms.”

Pandemic or no, alcohol can be a source of problems in people’s lives, whether it’s too much social drinking or a more involved situation.

## Recognizing a problem

It can be difficult to understand the difference between problem drinking and alcoholism.

Alcoholism implies a physical chemical dependency on the substance in addition to negatively affecting health



and relationships. On the other hand, problem drinkers are not physically dependent, so can go days, weeks, or months without consuming any alcohol. But when they do turn to the bottle, they may engage in binge drinking, potentially harming their professional and personal relationships.

There are various types of problematic drinking. Someone may experience periods of controlled drinking where they perform their duties regularly or they may engage in excessive, out-of-control drinking. It is easier to identify a problem drinker when their behavior is extreme or alarming. Dangerous acts such as driving intoxicated or manifesting rageful outbursts are not uncommon. However, it is possible for someone to be a problem drinker and maintain a pleasant and calm demeanor.

High functioning alcoholics or problem drinkers may not appear to need assistance. A “functional alcoholic” or “high-functioning alcoholic” is not a formal diagnosis. It’s a commonly used term describing a person who is dependent on alcohol but functions in society by completing daily tasks and keeping commitments. With these individuals, loved ones often grow confused about accurately identifying a problem and contemplate how to express their concerns to the functioning alcoholic.