

Gray Matters on Summer Cheer

by Leslie A. Gray, LCMHC, RYT

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Summertime is right on the horizon. There is a light at the end of this tunnel and I'm pretty sure it's not a freight train headed our way. Our long winter season is no joke. Consequently, summer in New Hampshire is fast and furious and New Hampshireites take their summer fun very seriously. Long days, warm weather, and the playground nature provided with all that the lakes and mountains have to offer... right at our fingertips. How lucky are we!?

It's easy to slip into vacation-mode during the summer season living in such an outdoor-friendly environment. Maybe it's a nice cold beer at the top of that mountain you just climbed; anchored down at the sand bar with a drink in one hand and a frisbee in the other; enjoying a glass of wine with the sunset any old night of the week. Campfires, cookouts, and camping, oh my!

It can sometimes be challenging to keep the alcohol consumption from creeping into the danger zone; especially when alcohol is such a big part of our culture. There are some telltale signs to know if you are overdoing it, and some very straightforward ways to reign it back in.

Pay attention to areas of your life that are negatively impacted by the amount of alcohol you're consuming. If your health is suffering, this is just your body's way of letting you know, "Hey, slow it down out there!" This might be in the form of unwanted weight gain, hangovers, or heart problems. Blotchy skin is a way your body might try to signal others that there is a problem if you choose to ignore the more subtle internal cues. Maybe your body can embarrass you into taking better care of yourself or get someone that cares about you to notice and speak up.

If drinking is having a negative impact on your finances, it might be time to take a closer look at your consumption. Maybe you can't pay your bills because you're spending too much on alcohol, or you're suddenly using credit cards instead of cash on hand to support your habit. Hiding alcohol, lying about how much you drink, or making impulsive decisions like drinking and driving (this includes being at the helm) are all serious warning signs.

There are three concepts that, when used together, can be very helpful for folks struggling with over-consumption. Feel free to apply them to any behavior you want to change such as using drugs, misusing medication, smoking, eating, working, gambling, shopping, sex, hoarding, or screen time.

The first concept is called Harm Reduction. Sometimes, we tackle things with a little too much gusto, setting our sights sky-high, then feeling frustrated when we fail. Harm Reduction takes this common barrier into consideration and employs a more reasonable approach in that anything less than what you are doing now will reduce the harm to your body, life, finances, etc. It helps to break it down into smaller goals with shorter time spans. Make a commitment to have one less beer today than you normally would. Tomorrow, add a glass of water between each alcoholic beverage. This will not only slow you down since your stomach will feel fuller faster, but it will also help to hydrate you and metabolize the alcohol better.

The second concept is Urge Surfing. When you pay attention to an urge, you'll notice that it seems to build in intensity, just like an ocean wave. Many people give in to the urge... right before it breaks.

Knowing that the urge won't last forever, challenge yourself to hold out. When you successfully resist the urge, your brain develops confidence that you don't have to give into your urges. Just like a wave that loses its strength when it breaks, the urge to drink will feel less intense, too. Distract yourself, drink water, give your pancreas a healthy sweet like fruit to curb the craving. (This technique is not recommended for individuals who have become chemically dependent on alcohol or some other substance as it can be dangerous to attempt to detox without proper medical care.)

Lastly, the practice of mindfulness, when combined with Harm Reduction and Urge Surfing takes it to new heights. Mindful is the opposite of mindless. When we mindlessly engage in something, we aren't paying attention or really experiencing it. Think of a time when you sat in front of the TV with a bowl-full-of-something only to reach in 'mindlessly' and discover it was empty. You think to yourself, "Did I seriously eat the whole bowl?" That's because you weren't present for the experience which means you also weren't listening to your body's signals to stop. Mindful practices mean we are paying attention to what we are doing while we're doing it.

Enjoy life more by choosing to be here now.

Cheers!

Leslie A. Gray is a Licensed Clinical Mental Health Counselor and operates Gray Matters Counseling & Wellness, PLLC in Laconia NH. Feel free to submit responses or requests for subject content to: askgraymatters@gmail.com.