

Changing the Focus: Envisioning Alcohol Use Through a Harm Reduction Lens

Case 1

27-year-old woman with bipolar disorder referred by her psychiatrist for evaluation of alcohol use.

She began increasing her alcohol use several months ago, to help with feelings of anxiety. Alcohol use typically occurs 2-3 days per week, while she is alone in her apartment. She primarily drinks hard seltzers, usually 4 but at times up to 9, over a 2–3 hour time span.

Initially alcohol was helpful for her mood, however for past 2months, she has felt loss of control in her drinking with negative consequences including increased thoughts and acts of self-harm while drinking, as well as nausea and vomiting on mornings after drinking. Additionally, her psychiatrist recommends stopping alcohol due to being prescribed lithium. She lives with her sister, who has expressed some concern. She works in retail and is sexually active with 1 male partner.

She has tried quitting cold turkey multiple times, but then feels overwhelmed emotionally and ends up using again. She no longer has a goal of abstinence but wants to cut back instead. She denies withdrawal symptoms.

She smokes marijuana daily which she finds helpful for her mood and doesn't want to stop. Denies other substance use. Only medication is lithium.

1. Identify potential risks associated with her alcohol use

2. Discuss harm reduction strategies that may help her use alcohol more safely

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Case 2

40 year old man with alcohol use disorder and opioid use disorder, stable on buprenorphine/naloxone (suboxone) but with ongoing alcohol use. His alcohol use has resulted in multiple hospitalizations for pancreatitis or electrolyte abnormalities. He is currently staying on the street. He has a history of post-traumatic stress disorder and alcohol helps him “escape.” However, he recognizes that alcohol use has impacted his ability to work and have housing. He has a 7-year-old daughter who is a motivating factor. His current alcohol use is 2 beers on most days, but one or two times per month he will drink a liter of vodka in a day, often culminating in hospitalization. He wants to stop drinking “eventually” but does not feel confident in his ability to stop drinking currently.

1. **Identify potential risks associated with his alcohol use**
2. **Discuss harm reduction strategies that may help him use alcohol more safely**