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## Unhappy hour - can alcohol make you sad?



When the proposed new [Australian alcohol guidelines for low risk drinking](#) from the National Health and Medical Research Council were released recently, the headline grabber was the big change in the definition of a low risk level of drinking for men: down from four standard drinks daily to the same upper limit that's recommended for women - just two drinks daily. But browse through the whole document and there's a fact about alcohol that rarely gets an airing - its link with depression. And if you think that means using alcohol to drown sorrows, it's not always the case. For some people, alcohol comes first and depression comes later, says Professor Sitharthan Thiagarajan of the Australian Centre for Addiction Research in Sydney who's trying to find out if controlling their drinking through a new program can help depressed drinkers improve their mood.

"Compared to people who drink because they're depressed, there are more people who get depressed because they regularly drink too much" he points out. "We know that when people drink a lot over a long period, their mood goes down - yet when they start to drink less, their mood goes up. But what no one really understands is why."

There are some theories though - one is that too much alcohol can affect the part of the brain that influences mood, says Thiagarajan.

"But there may also be things in people's personal lives caused by too much alcohol that can affect mood too - if you start to have problems at work or with a relationship, for instance, because you're drinking too much," he adds.

But a study of 2,500 people who took part in the Centre's [Controlled Drinking by Correspondence Program](#) has found that their mood was improved by learning to drink less through the program.

Typically these drinkers were having six or more standard drinks most days of the week. "These weren't people who fit the stereotype of the problem drinker - they were generally educated, had jobs and relationships and owned property. And when we looked at why they were drinking it was usually because it had just become a habit. Some women would come home from work, open a bottle, have a drink, then have another drink while they made dinner and by the end of the night would have finished most of a bottle," he says.

The aim of the eight week program which is free, confidential, and available by correspondence or online, isn't abstinence but to help people reduce their drinking by changing their behaviour. Now the Centre is doing a nationwide study to see if a similar correspondence program can help people with both a drinking problem and anxiety and depression to control their drinking and improve their mood.

Anyone interested in this program - the National Comorbidity Management Program, can email [acar@acar.net.au](mailto:acar@acar.net.au) or call 1800 006 577.

### Do you think too much alcohol can make people feel down or depressed sometimes?

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