

Alcohol-related violence: how to protect yourself

Some people are affected by alcohol-related violence when they try to help drunk friends who are becoming aggressive, putting themselves and others into dangerous situations, while others are affected by people they have no relationship with whatsoever.

Although physical violence is much more dangerous, verbal aggression can still be extremely frightening.

Here are some simple tips to help protect yourself if you come into contact with drunk people you don't know:

- **Avoid eye contact**
- **Keep doing what you're doing**
- **Don't argue with them**
- **Leave the environment as soon as it is safe to do so**
- **Don't get physically involved – get help**

Here are some things that may help you keep a little safer if a drunk friend becomes violent:

- **If they're fighting, call for help**
- **Don't argue with them**
- **Keep your distance**
- **Back away from them using small steps and your hand by your side**
- **If you know them, keep eye contact**
- **All else fails, run away**

People affected by alcohol can be potentially dangerous, whether you know them or not. If you are trying to assist a drunk friend, always remember your first priority must always be personal safety. If in doubt, always call 000.

ALWAYS REMEMBER, YOU ARE A FRIEND, NOT A DOCTOR.

Why do people become violent after drinking alcohol?

Not everyone who drinks alcohol becomes aggressive or violent. We do know that certain people are more prone to this type of behaviour, e.g., young men who have a history of violence or have mental health problems. When these people drink, they can become extremely angry, particularly when they feel threatened or frustrated. If they are in a hot, noisy and crowded place this only makes it worse. While some people can express their anger in a controlled and constructive way, others lash out aggressively. This can lead to intimidating, violent or bullying behaviour endangering themselves, other people and property. This type of behaviour is unpredictable and so the people around them are often unprepared and as such, can get badly hurt.

What can you do to protect yourself if you come into contact with drunk people you don't know?

Drunk people are unpredictable and if they are prone to violent behaviour they can be extremely dangerous. If you come into contact with a group of drunk people or an alcohol-affected person here are a couple of things you can do to protect yourself:

- **Avoid eye contact** – never look an alcohol-affected person you don't know in the eye. If you do, there is every chance they will see it as an invasion of their territory, much like looking into the eyes of an animal in the jungle. If you're walking past a group of drunk people make sure you know where they are and what they are doing but there is no need to look them in the face. If a drunk person addresses you and you have no choice but to respond, try to look above or below their eye-line when you speak to them

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- **Keep doing what you're doing** – if an adult was walking down the street at night they are likely to be looking at least 100 metres ahead in case of danger. Young people tend not to do this and do not notice problems until they are very close. Changing your behaviour (e.g., crossing the road, suddenly stopping talking) too close to drunk people is likely to be noticed and sensing your fear, they may respond aggressively
- **Don't argue with them** – never argue with a drunk person! If they start accusing you of something that you didn't do, telling them that they are wrong will only escalate the situation. Each time you say 'no' to them, their anger will escalate. Use a calm voice, be as non-confrontational as possible and try to assure them that you don't want to argue with them and that you do not want trouble
- **Leave the environment as soon as it is safe to do so** – if you are at a party or gathering, or a nightclub or bar, as soon as you have got away from the drunk person or people who have just confronted you, get out of there as soon as you are able to do so safely. Drunk people can get 'tunnel-vision' when it comes to incidents and they do not forget – if you come into their field of vision sometime later in the night there is every possibility that they could lash out without any warning
- **Don't get physically involved** – get help. If you see someone else in trouble who is being threatened by drunk people, as much as you may want to try to help them by getting involved, you are most probably going to make matters worse. Never put yourself in physical danger by helping someone else. If you see an incident, call 000 and get help!

What are the warning signs that a drunk friend could become violent?

Here are some simple things to look out for that may mean a friend who has been drinking alcohol could become violent:

- They become focussed on a particular incident that was quite small and are building it up to be much more important than it was
- They show signs of anxiety – e.g., they wring their hands, the pitch and tone of their voice changes, they pace the floor
- They start to speak more loudly and are becoming irrational
- They make verbal threats
- They try to intimidate others by moving closer to them and puffing their chests out and clenching their fists

Can you prevent a drunk friend from becoming violent?

If you are going to make a difference, and there is no guarantee that you will, you need to intervene early. As soon as you see the warning signs and it is safe to do so, you should attempt to calm the person down. It is important to understand that you are not trying to get them to see what they are doing is 'right' or 'wrong', rather you are attempting to get them to regain control of their behaviour without 'lashing out'.

- Move them to a quiet place, away from stimulation
- Try to get them to sit down if possible
- Ask people who do not need to be there to leave
- Speak to them using a soft, controlled voice and use their name when you can
- Ask them why they're feeling the way they do and acknowledge their feelings
- Give them time to talk and let them know you are there to help them

What can you do to protect yourself if a drunk friend becomes violent?

People affected by alcohol can be potentially dangerous, whether you know them or not. Your first priority must always be your personal safety – never put yourself into a situation where you could get hurt. If in doubt, particularly if you think they could hurt themselves, you or someone else, always call 000.

- **If they're fighting, call for help** – do not get physically involved in a fight as it is highly likely the only outcome will be that you will get hurt as well. If a police officer sees a fight, it is unlikely that he or she would try to deal with the situation themselves, instead they would call for reinforcements. You need to do the same thing, even if it is a friend call for help

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- **Don't argue with them** – you will never win an argument with a drunk friend and every time you tell them that they are wrong they are likely to become more frustrated and more aggressive. Without being patronizing, do your best to agree with what they are saying and attempt to 'talk them down'
- **Keep your distance** – give them as much space as possible and try your best to move them to a quiet place, away from groups of people and music and noise. If you can get them to sit down they are far less likely to make any sudden moves that could those around them
- **Back away from them using small steps and your hands by your side** – never move towards an aggressive drunk person. As you step back from them your hands should be kept open (no clenched fists), with your palms facing downwards. Slowly move them up and down, indicating a calming motion
- **If you know them, keep eye contact** – if you feel it is safe to do so you can use eye contact to empathize with your friend. Your body language, your words and eye contact can go together to calm the drunk person to some extent in some instances, however, it is always important to remember that those affected by alcohol are unpredictable, even if they are your friend
- **If all else fails, run away!**