

# Alcohol-related violence: how to protect yourself

**People affected by alcohol can be aggressive and violent, whether you know them or not. It's all too easy to become a victim of alcohol-related violence as a result of coming into contact with drunk people you don't know or when trying to help drunk friends who become aggressive.**

Tips to help protect you 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**

Tips to help protect you 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, with your hands by your side**
- **if you know them, keep eye contact**
- **if all else fails, run away**

If you are trying to help a drunk friend or someone you don't know, remember your first priority is always your personal safety. If in doubt, 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, bullying or violent behaviour – endangering themselves, other people and property. This type of behaviour is unpredictable, which means that the people around them are often unprepared and sometimes 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 people who have been drinking or a drunk person, there are some things you can do to help 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 directly at them. 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 is 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, they are likely to become more angry. Use a calm voice, be as non-confrontational as possible and try to assure them that you don't want to argue 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 the 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 focused on an incident that was quite small and start to build 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 about

- they start to speak more loudly and irrationally
- they make verbal threats
- they try to intimidate others by moving closer to them and puffing their chest 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
- 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 are 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, 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, they would call for reinforcements. You need to do the same thing - even if it is a friend, call for help.

**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

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patronising, 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 hurt 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 your hands 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 empathise with your friend. In some instances, your body language, words and eye contact can go together to help calm a drunk friend. However, it is always important to remember that those affected by alcohol are unpredictable – even if they are a friend.

**If all else fails, run away!**