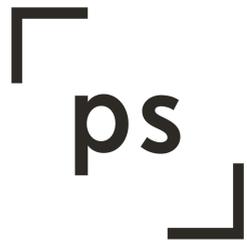


# Drinkaware

**Talking about drinking**

**Qualitative research report: November 2023**



**drinkaware**

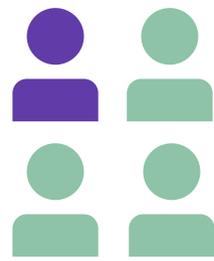
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# The headlines

The story in a nutshell

# What have we learnt about conversations about drinking from the 2023 Monitor data?



**One in four UK adults are concerned about someone else's drinking, and particularly about the amount of alcohol they drink**

They are most likely to be concerned about the drinking of a friend (36%), a partner or ex-partner (23%) or a parent/guardian (17%)

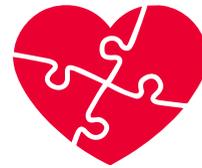


**Over half of UK adults who have been concerned about someone else's drinking have spoken to them about this (53%)**

But amongst drinkers, very few say someone has raised a concern with them about their drinking (4% have had a concern raised in 12 months)

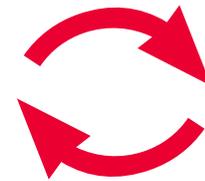


**One in five of those concerned have not taken any action**



**How comfortable people feel about starting conversations about someone else's drinking differs depending on the relationship**

78% would feel comfortable starting a conversation with their partner about their drinking, compared to 53% with friends



**A third (35%) of drinkers who had a concerned raised about their drinking indicated they had made changes as a result**



**Starting a conversation about someone's drinking appears to be more effective than just making a comment**

44% of those who said someone had a conversation with them about about their drinking indicating that they took actions as a result compared to 32% of those who said someone had just made a comment to them

# The headlines from the qualitative research (1)

## What did we learn about the conversations people are having over concerns for someone else's drinking?



Although the findings in the quantitative Monitor data suggest most people say they would feel comfortable starting a conversation with someone because they are concerned about their drinking, the qualitative research suggests actually **having these conversations can be difficult and emotional.**



The qualitative research revealed that some of the **key barriers** that may prevent people from initiating a conversation about their concerns are:

- expecting denial or an argument
- the conversation feels pointless
- not knowing how to broach the subject
- fear of damaging relationships
- they don't feel it is their place
- they are not 100% sure there is a problem



**Denial** and **defensiveness** are the most common reactions during initial conversations from the person whose drinking is a concern, particularly if the person is not expecting this conversation and feels 'ambushed'.



**Challenging perceptions** of what constitutes 'problematic drinking' may help in overcoming defensiveness and denial. It can also be helpful to forewarn the person about the conversation to allow them time to digest the concerns.

## The headlines from the qualitative research (2)

 Having a conversation with someone about concerns over their drinking may be spontaneous or planned in advance and may be **ongoing for several years**. Often, comments may be made for a period of time before an in-depth conversation takes place.

 The **long-term goal** of these conversations is that people will see and accept that their drinking is unhealthy or problematic, and will then either cut down or stop drinking altogether.

 Participants used **different strategies** to try to get the person to see that their drinking may be problematic, namely: a shock tactic/accusatory approach; a softer, more supportive approach; or, providing 'evidence' about their drinking habits or behaviours. Strategies differ depending on the relationship and on how problematic their drinking is deemed to be.

 Conversations often **focus on how often or how much someone is drinking** and the impact of this, but less often on the reasons why people feel the need to drink in this way.

 During conversations, a small number of participants suggested the person would benefit from seeking professional help; most said they would feel comfortable doing this if they felt it was necessary.

# The headlines from the qualitative research (3)



Conversations can have an **impact** on the person's drinking, or on their perceptions of their drinking, although this **may take some time** and may only occur after having multiple conversations.



However, for some people, and often those with an established drinking dependency or addiction, participants felt that they had tried saying everything they could to the person and nothing seems to have an impact.



Ultimately, the impact of the conversations seems to largely depend on **how open the drinker is to accepting that their drinking may be harmful or problematic.**



Whilst several people have reached out to peers for support and advice, **most do not seek support from other sources** such as online or health professionals.



To support others in similar situations, participants suggested **Drinkaware** could:

- encourage people to have more conversations about drinking
- better educate the public to change perceptions of what harmful drinking can look like
- provide tips and information for people who are concerned about someone else's drinking, such as on conversation starters, what to say/what not to say, how to diffuse situations and where to find more support

# Background and approach

Who did we speak to?

# Qualitative research approach: an overview



In summer 2023, Drinkaware commissioned PS Research to conduct qualitative research to gather views from the general public about the conversations people are having (or want to have) with other people about their drinking.

## Methodology:

- Four online focus groups lasting approximately 90 minutes; each group had 4-5 participants
- Ten individual in-depth conversations lasting between 30-50 minutes and conducted over an online video platform
- All focus groups and interviews took place between 2nd - 16th October 2023



**Participants:** A total of **29 participants** took part in the research. Minimum quotas were set on gender, age, ethnicity and SEG to ensure a mix of participants. Participants were recruited from all regions of the UK (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland).

Participants had to belong to one of the following groups:

- Been concerned about the drinking of a close friend or relative in the last 12 months and had a conversation about this with them
- Been concerned about the drinking of a close friend or relative in the last 12 months and either not mentioned these concerns to them or made a comment about these concerns but not had a conversation about this
- High risk drinkers (based on the AUDIT-C questionnaire) who had had a conversation with a relative, friend or health professional in the last 12 months because they were concerned about their drinking or where they had suggested that they cut down

All names used in case studies in this report are fictitious.

# Qualitative approach: recruitment quotas



## Quotas set and achieved:

Minimum quotas were set on the following to ensure a range of demographics and experiences were represented:

### Self-identified gender:

	Minimum quota	Number of participants
Male	10	14
Female	10	15

### Age:

	Minimum quota	Number of participants
18-34	7	11
35-54	7	11
55+	7	7

### Ethnicity:

	Minimum quota	Number of participants
White	17	22
Any other ethnic group	7	8

### Region:

	Minimum quota	Number of participants
England	5	15
Scotland	5	4
Wales	5	6
N. Ireland	5	4

### SEG:

	Minimum quota	Number of participants
AB	7	7
C1C2	7	17
DE	7	5

### Conversation type

	Minimum quota	Number of participants
Had a conversation about concerns	17	16
Not had a conversation about concerns	6	6
High Risk Drinker (had a conversation about concerns)	5	5

Note: any shortfalls in original quotas set were accepted; although 30 participants were originally recruited, one participant did not turn up to the final focus group

# Barriers to starting conversations

**Why do people find it difficult to start a conversation when they are concerned about someone's drinking?**

# Barriers to initiating conversations: a summary

The qualitative research revealed some key barriers that may prevent people from starting a conversation with someone about their drinking.



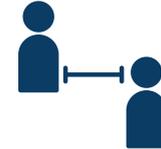
**Expecting denial / an argument**



**Fear of damaging relationships**



**Conversation feels pointless**



**Don't feel it is their place to raise concerns**



**Not knowing how to broach the subject**



**Need to be 100% sure there is a problem**

# Barriers: Expecting denial or an argument



A common reason amongst participants for not wanting to start a conversation with someone about their drinking habits is that they would expect the person to **deny** there is a problem and that they would expect them to become **defensive** and potentially **argumentative**.



And if these concerns have already been raised previously, either through a comment or a conversation, and were met with denial or aggression, people often feel reticent about starting another conversation.



If someone makes a comment to my mum about how many cocktails she's had or something like that, she will react quite harshly, saying something along the lines of 'I can do what I want'.

(Female, aged 18-34, England)



I suppose in childhood, I saw my dad try to speak to my mum [about her drinking]. I remember him pouring her drinks down the sink and then the outrage that would follow that, the throwing of plates and destructive behaviour. To be honest, I think it's fear of her reaction that's the main reason that I haven't brought it up.

(Male, aged 18-34, England)



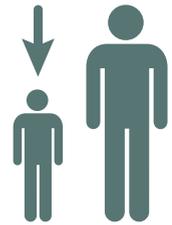
She's got quite a strong personality, she would be quite opinionated, quite controlling. So I think a conversation could be turned round very quickly that I would be the bad guy. I think it would be me sticking my nose into personal business and would probably be given short shrift.

(Male, aged 55+. N. Ireland)

# Barriers: Conversation feels pointless



Some of the participants who are concerned about the drinking of a friend or relative but have not had a conversation with them about this feel fairly sure that nothing would change even if they did speak to them.



This seemed to be a particular barrier when the the participant was concerned about a parent's drinking, suggesting that people feel their parent would not be receptive to talking about this with their (adult) child.



People who have had multiple conversations about a person's drinking can feel there is no point in having more conversations when previous conversations have not achieved anything.



Whatever I say to him, there is no reaction. No reply. Nothing will follow after we have had the conversations.  
(Male, aged 35-54, Wales)



I will make comments to my dad he is drunk, but he usually pretends he hasn't heard. So that doesn't give me much confident that it would be much different if I were to try and have a conversation when he is sober.  
(Female, aged 18-34, Scotland)

# Barriers: Don't know how to broach the subject



Participants felt that commenting on someone else's drinking habits is generally a very **difficult subject to broach**.

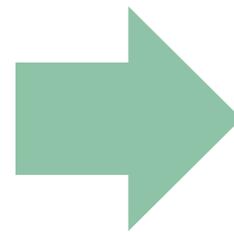
Unless suffering from an alcohol addiction, the choice of how much or how often someone drinks alcohol is considered a personal lifestyle choice, therefore saying you are concerned about these choices can seem:



**Like a personal attack**

**Judgemental**

**That you feel they lack self-control**



**People can be put off from raising concerns as they are unsure how to start the conversation or speak to the person about this without coming across as criticising or being judgemental**



I think its quite personal. You feel like you are insulting someone. I think if someone said to me that I was drinking too much, I think I would feel offended.

(Female, aged 35-44, England)



I knew my work colleague had a drink problem. And I allowed myself to go along with it because I didn't know how to approach it with him. I used to say you look like you are not looking after yourself, that kind of thing but I wasn't close enough to say anything about it.

(Male, aged 35-44, Wales)

# Barriers: Fear of damaging relationships



Many of the qualitative research participants had not raised their concerns about someone's drinking with them as they were worried that this would **damage their relationship**, even if their drinking was in itself having a negative impact on the relationship.



Participants did not tend to feel this is a barrier when the concern is about their partner or spouse's drinking. However, this can be a barrier for most other relationships, both those very close (such as a close friend or parent) and those more distant.



It's a very difficult situation because while you would like to say something or do something, the ramifications could be losing contact. I think it could ruin the relationship we have.

(Male, aged 55+, N. Ireland)



I am concerned about the drinking of a couple of family members but it is a topic that you don't want to raise in case it jeopardises relationships, I think that is probably the reason.

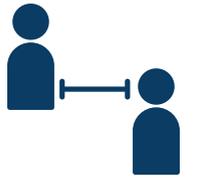
(Male, aged 18-34, England)



We probably make light of [my friend's drinking] as a group of men. I know it's not a laughing matter, but it is what he's about on a weekend. I don't think for a moment we'd be able to make any changes to how he lives his life. I don't think I'm close enough either to be honest. And I don't want to break the relationship and the friendship we have.

(Male, aged 55+, England)

# Barriers: Not my place to say this



Participants also often felt that even though they may be concerned about the drinking of someone close to them, they did not feel it was their place to raise these concerns. Although this may apply to various different relationships or situations, the most commonly mentioned were:



## Child to parent

Several participants in the research who are concerned about a parent's drinking (and may have been concerned since childhood) feel it is difficult to reverse roles and 'parent the parent' and that their parent may react badly to being told by their child what they should or should not be doing, even though the child is now an adult.

“When I was younger, my dad used to drink a lot. But I wouldn't have been able to say anything to my dad. Being Indian, you had to show a certain amount of respect.  
(Female, aged 35-54, England)



## If they have a partner/spouse

People often seem to feel that the responsibility of 'tackling' the issue of someone's drinking lies with the the person's spouse or partner (if they have one). Participants also felt they would be comfortable having this conversation with their own partner/spouse.

“I feel like maybe I'm not the person to speak to my dad about it. I feel that maybe it should be his wife.  
(Female, aged 35-54, N. Ireland)



## If they drink themselves

If people drink alcohol themselves (particularly if they do so to excess on occasion), they say speaking to someone about their drinking feels hypocritical and they also expect that the person would deflect these concerns back onto them.

“Sometimes I feel like I'm being a hypocrite because I like a drink. You know, it's not illegal to drink.  
(Female, aged 35-54, Wales)

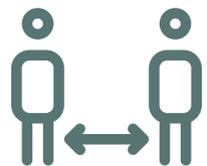
# Barriers: Need to be sure there is a problem



Given the potential expectation that they may upset or anger someone by speaking to them about their drinking, it is perhaps not surprising that some participants said they would want to be sure that the person's drinking is **sufficiently problematic** to warrant risking this and raising their concerns.



It seems that is more clear-cut whether someone's drinking is considered to be problematic if they **live with the person** or if the person has experienced **multiple regular negative consequences** from drinking (such as passing out or having to call emergency services).



However, when the concern is about someone slightly **more distant**, such as a friend or colleague, participants felt it can be **difficult to be 100% sure** that their drinking behaviour is of a big enough concern to speak to them about this.



Some participants had spoken to other friends or family members to see if they also felt that the person's drinking was a concern. This often made them more confident to broach the subject.



Sometimes I think 'is it me?'. If I mention it to my family, sometimes they say 'oh leave him alone, he's worked hard'. But I'm not a massive drinker, so maybe it is me, maybe I just don't tolerate drunk people very well. (Female, aged 35-44, Wales)



Partly I didn't raise my concerns because [my colleague] was managing. I think they would have been better off reducing or stopping drinking but I didn't feel it was my place to raise it, and maybe it wasn't as significant an issue as I felt. Maybe it's my judgement and it's a borderline issue. (Male, aged 55+, Scotland)

# Communication strategies

**What are people trying to achieve through these conversations and what strategies do they use?**

# How do these conversations usually start?

Whilst some conversations about a concern over someone's drinking habits are planned in advance, many are spontaneous and may be prompted by specific incidents. Conversations and comments may have been ongoing for many years.



## May start with one-off comments

- Often made whilst the person is drinking (e.g. 'haven't you had enough?')
- Repeated comments over time may be a precursor to having a more in-depth conversation



## Planned conversations

- Usually occur after concerns about the person's drinking habits have been felt for some time
- May take place with other people or after consulting other people about concerns, e.g. other family members
- Drinker may feel 'ambushed' and be defensive



## Spontaneous conversations

- Often occur when a person is drunk or the day after the person has been drinking heavily
- May be prompted by a specific drink-related incident, e.g. if someone injures themselves or has an argument when drunk
- May be prompted by a comment the drinker themselves makes about their drinking



Comments, spontaneous and planned conversations may be **ongoing for several years**, particularly when people live in the same household and/or are in a very close relationship (e.g. spouses, siblings, parent/child).

# Case studies: a spontaneous and a planned conversation



## A spontaneous conversation

- Sarah has been becoming concerned about the frequency of her friend's drinking
- Both friends are in their early 30s
- During a walk at the weekend, Sarah's friend mentioned how drunk she had been the night before and this prompted Sarah to voice her concerns

"The conversation was quite **informal**. She was saying that she was hungover but that she hadn't drunk in ages, but I knew that wasn't true, so I said you were out at that party last weekend and then that work thing and **I just said maybe you are drinking too much too often and you should calm it down a bit**. She was a bit surprised and said that 'everyone is like that', but I said no, we've all calmed down. It wasn't like a sit-down intervention or anything. **We were just talking and it ended up turning into a proper chat**. There wasn't a lot of back and forth, but it was all OK and she agreed maybe she should cut it out for a bit."



## A planned conversation

- Dembe's mother-in-law was concerned about her husband's drinking
- Dembe took his father-in-law to a sporting event and planned in advance to mention it whilst there
- He had researched support groups in the local area in advance and felt comfortable giving this to his father-in-law

"My mother-in-law was upset about her husband's drinking and I volunteered to have a chat to him because he respects me. **I decided to take him to a rugby match and speak to him there**. I bought him a pint and he said 'I needed that'. I saw this as a way in and so I said your wife has concerns about his drinking. I wasn't sure what the best way was to start the conversation without embarrassing him or making him feel bad. **I was very direct, trying to say I'm sure you are aware there have been concerns, all the family has observed this but we all love you, and this comes from love**. I said that I am not an expert, but it might be a good idea to contact someone for help. I don't know if he has done this yet."

# The goal of these conversations is to enable people to accept that they have unhealthy or problematic drinking habits



The **long-term**, big hope behind raising these concerns is that the person will change their drinking habits, i.e. stop drinking altogether/cut down.



But people recognise that to do this, the drinker has to be **ready to accept that they have an unhealthy relationship with alcohol.**



The **immediate** goals of the conversations are to try to get the person to understand:

- that the level and/or frequency with which they are drinking is not healthy
- the various different impacts that their drinking is having, i.e. on their health, their work, their relationships etc.
- that the concern comes from a place of love and that they are there to support them and help them



I was hoping she would twig and maybe think, oh wait not everyone is drinking like me, maybe I should scale it back a bit, maybe I should do something about this.  
(Female, aged 18-34, Scotland)

# People try different strategies to get the person to see that they may not have a healthy relationship with alcohol

The participants in the qualitative research who have had conversations with someone about their drinking used different strategies to encourage people to understand they may be drinking in a problematic way (and participants may use a combination of strategies if conversations are ongoing):



## Accusation or 'shock tactic'

Some years ago, I did get to a point where I told him to choose either me and the children or the alcohol.  
(Female, aged 35-54, Wales)



## Supportive, or 'softly, softly'

Our early conversations started with 'I see you have a problem, you need help, we can help and support you'.  
(Female, aged 35-54, England)



## Providing 'evidence'

I just said you seem to be on a different level to everyone else. Everyone is having a drink but you are having multiple drinks and pushing it to the extreme.  
(Male, aged 35-54, England)

# Case study: different conversation strategies



## The view from a High Risk Drinker\*

Roxanne drinks every day or almost every day and usually drinks at least one or more bottles of wine when drinking. She is a single parent of an adult child and works full-time.



### Shock tactic approach

- After a night out drinking, one friend called her the next day and told her she needed to stop drinking and that people had been talking about her drinking and her behaviour
- Whilst this conversation upset Roxanne greatly, it does appear to have had an impact as she then discussed this with other friends and has decided to make some changes



She was very abrupt. She said you need to stop drinking. It was horrible, I felt targeted and attacked. It's already something I know but I felt they were ashamed of me. Most people drink too much but nobody needs to be attacked. I do think what she said was true, so whilst I don't agree with the delivery, for someone else to say that to you, it kind of makes it real.



### Supportive approach

- Roxanne has had many conversations with another friend over several years about her drinking; this friend takes a supportive approach offering help and trying to understand why she drinks
- Whilst this has not necessarily had a direct impact on Roxanne's drinking, she has turned to her friend for support to help her make changes now that she has decided to cut down



I called my other friend to tell her and she said 'we are here for you, whenever you are ready we can get all the support in place to help you'. She understands why I drink. She is quite gentle and supportive. We have talked about it a lot over the years and she has been helping me to identify my triggers.

\*defined using AUDIT-C questions with research participant during the recruitment process

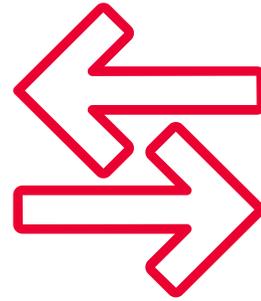
# Strategies differ depending on the person, the relationship and also on how problematic their drinking is deemed to be

## Example 1

**Concerned about:** husband

**Concern:** whilst her husband's drinking is less problematic than it has been in the past, she still feels that he would benefit from drinking less and less often

**Approach:** has previously used shock tactics but now tends to use an 'evidence approach', pointing out how many drinks he has had or how hungover he is the next day; no real friction or animosity



“ He probably thinks I'm nagging. Sometimes I will tolerate it more, then other times I will say 'that is definitely enough, if you drink any more I am tipping it all away', that kind of thing. Or the next day I might say 'you had way too much last night. Sometimes we make a bit of a joke about it. (Female, 35-54, Wales)

## Example 2

**Concerned about:** brother

**Concern:** excessive and frequent drinking that often leads to arguments and violence and may be accompanied by other unhealthy behaviours (e.g. drugs)

**Approach:** previously tried different approaches at different times, depending on what has happened and how receptive he is; usually met with denial and hostility

“ We've had multiple conversations. They can vary from quite nice conversations, trying to reason with him, to full-scale arguments. He can get very defensive. (Female, 35-54, England)

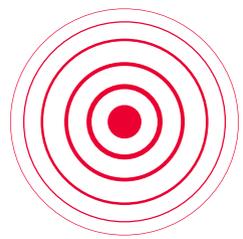
# Conversations often focus on how often or how much someone is drinking and the impact of this, but not the reasons why they drink

Many conversations focus on drinking habits and/or impact of drinking and not on why people feel the need to drink like this.



## Focus on amount drunk and frequency of drinking

- no off switch / can't seem to stop at one or two
- always get drunk at the weekend/when going out
- drinking every day/most days



## Focus on impact of drinking

- impact on current or future health
- impact on relationships
- impact on work



## But should more focus be on understanding the reasons why people are drinking?

Although some participants said they did try to speak about why people are drinking, many did not appear to discuss this, and particularly not during initial conversations.



I think people need to show compassion, some level of understanding. Don't try to judge, just show a level of care. Don't make me feel guilty or try to scare me with possible health implications, it's not going to work.  
(High Risk Drinker, Male, aged 18-34, England)

# Seeking professional support is not always suggested, but most say they would feel comfortable doing this if they feel it is necessary



Several participants had suggested to the person they were concerned about that they should consider seeking professional help. This was more likely to be mentioned when:

- the perception is that the person's drinking has become seriously harmful and problematic
- the person has reacted well to the initial concerns being raised

However of those who have suggested this, very few people appear to have gone on to seek support, with most people responding that they didn't think it was necessary or that they felt able to change without this support.

Some participants had suggested moderation techniques the person could try or had suggested alcohol-free activities they could do together, such as going for a walk, rather than going out to pubs or bars etc.



I did suggest he should maybe speak to the GP and I said I would go with him and support him to do that, or look online or something, but he said he didn't feel he needed to do that, that maybe he would just try not having alcohol in the house."

(Female, Aged 35-54, Wales)



It is just something that would never, ever happen. My mum says it's a generational thing. That because my dad is old and stuck in his ways, and its just something that his generation wouldn't even consider.

(Female, aged 18-34, Scotland)



It is nice to say, 'stop it'. But if this is addiction, this is a serious issue that requires professional people to address.

(Male, aged 55+, N. Ireland)

# Reactions to conversations

**What emotional reactions do people have to these conversations?**

# Denial and defensiveness are the most common reactions from the person whose drinking is a concern

Common reactions encountered when concerns have been raised include:



**Denial or defensiveness**



I don't think he sees himself as having a drink problem. He says 'I'm not an alcoholic, I don't need a drink when I get up in the morning. I've worked hard, I'm just relaxing'.

(Female, aged 35-54, Wales)



**Surprise**



We live quite far from my daughter so we have conversations over the phone or over WhatsApp or text about it. But she gets very angry. She doesn't seem able to discuss it in a civilised manner at all.

(Male, aged 55+, Wales)



**Feeling judged or attacked**



My friend's reaction was 'what are you talking about? You need to loosen up a bit'.

(Male, aged 35-54, England)



**Angry or argumentative**



**Embarrassed**



**Uninterested**

# Case study: Denial, surprise, argumentative



## The view from a High Risk Drinker\*

Elijah regularly drinks to excess but he does not feel that his drinking is harmful or problematic.

### A planned conversation

His wife was concerned about his drinking and has made some jokey comments but has not raised her concerns directly with him. Instead, she asked Elijah's father to speak to him about his drinking.

### Taking an accusatory strategy

His father took a 'strict parent' approach, telling him he needs to stop drinking altogether and immediately. The conversation focused on how drinking alcohol will harm his health.

### Reaction to concerns being raised

- **surprised** as he has never drunk in front of his dad
- **uncomfortable** that this had been discussed 'behind his back'
- **angry** that he was being accused of something he didn't agree with
- **defensive:** he told his father he was over-reacting



For my dad, if you drink alcohol, you are a bad person, you are a demon, a devil. I think it is part of his upbringing, his culture, traditions and values. But things have changed.



There are a million ways to die, not just by drinking alcohol. My dad tried to scare me by talking about the health implications, telling me that I was going to get liver cancer. I think those are conspiracy theories.



People shouldn't be judgemental or make the person feel like they are doing the worst thing. Don't make them feel like the bad guy. Once you do that you have lost the conversation. People need to show they understand their life, their lifestyle and show a level of care, some understanding.

\*defined using AUDIT-C questions with research participant during the recruitment process

# If people are not expecting this conversation, they are more likely to feel 'ambushed' and become defensive



People who have had these conversations (either because they were concerned about someone else's drinking or because someone was concerned about their own drinking) would **advise others** in the same situation to :

- forewarn people who you are concerned about the desire to speak to them about concerns before broaching the subject, so that people don't feel ambushed and are less likely to become aggressive or defensive
- say a minimal amount in the initial conversation and follow up on this a few days/weeks afterwards, allowing people to digest what has been said and the concerns raised



If someone has a real problem with alcohol and you surprise them with a conversation, I think that might initiate their fight or flight response, the hackles might go up. But if you sent a message first, that would give them time to think about it and respond. If it is not a big problem, I think you should take the opportunity when it presents itself. Me and my friend were talking about something relevant when we were walking and it was timely to mention it in a conversational manner.

(Female, Aged 18-34, England)



I think when someone is coming at you and you're not prepared for it and it's not in a supportive way, it can be quite difficult. People need to understand that if drinking has been a big feature in your life for a long time, it's not that easy to just say to somebody to stop now. There's so much that needs to be put into place first, to understand why a person drinks.

(High Risk Drinker, Female, aged 35-54, England)

# Those people raising their concerns often go through a range of emotions during the conversations

Although the findings from the quantitative Monitor data suggests most people say they would feel comfortable starting a conversation with someone about such a concern, the qualitative research amongst people who have had these conversations suggest they are often **difficult and emotional**, and that before and during these conversations they commonly feel:



**Anxious and worried**



I was anxious about bringing it up initially because I didn't want [my partner] to feel bad, I just wanted to start the conversation.  
(Female, aged 18-34, Scotland)



**Disappointed**



You just don't know how the conversation will be taken, whether it's going to be welcomed or whether you are going to be shut down.  
(Female, aged 35-54, N. Ireland)



**Angry**



I know it will go in one ear and out the other. I can't force him not to drink. So I do feel powerless because I know he has to change, there is nothing I can do to make him change.  
(Female, aged 35-54, England)



**Powerless**



**Hopeful**

# Case study: If you are struggling with your own drinking and want support, who you choose to speak to really matters



## The view some High Risk Drinkers\*

Simon was drinking heavily and when he decided to take a short break from drinking, he found this very difficult and was unable to do so. This concerned him and he decided he should to stop drinking altogether. He chose to tell some close friends and family about this decision.

## Who you speak to really matters

Simon called his mum and messaged a couple of close friends about his decision to stop drinking. His mum was surprised but supportive. Some of the friends he told also drink excessively and he found they initially reacted in an unhelpful way, suggesting he didn't need to stop; in later conversations, some were more supportive.



I have been reading a self-help book and it says to tell someone that you are stopping drinking, so I decided to ring my mum. She has always made comments to me about my drinking and we did have one sit-down conversation years ago after a specific incident. I have always been known as someone who can drink everyone under the table. This recent conversation was more about me saying it out loud, having that realisation that I had got to a point where I needed to have this conversation. It was a bit embarrassing but it was my mum so I knew she would be supportive.



A couple of friends I spoke to probably weren't the best people to talk to because I think they are dealing with their own problems with alcohol. They were like 'enjoy it, it's fine'. They were almost like an enabler, justifying what they do through me.

\*defined using AUDIT-C questions with research participant during the recruitment process

# Overcoming barriers and negative reactions

**What have we learnt about how to overcome these barriers and negative reactions?**

# Challenging perceptions of what is 'problematic drinking' may help in overcoming defensiveness and denial

Perceptions on 'normal' or 'acceptable' drinking behaviours and traditional views of 'an alcoholic' appear to strongly influence the extent to which someone accepts that their relationship with alcohol may not be healthy.



## "But everyone drinks like this"

The qualitative research revealed that when challenged about their drinking behaviours, many people denied they had a problem and feel that lots of people drink in a similar way.

Perceptions around 'normal' or 'acceptable' drinking levels are often influenced on the drinking of people around you, particularly parents and friends.



Everyone has a different perspective on what is normal [drinking levels]. I think it's whatever you have been brought up around.

(Female, aged 18-34, Scotland)



## "I'm not an alcoholic"

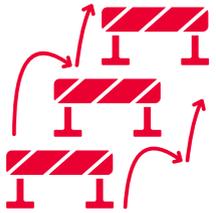
When challenged, some people denied that their drinking was problematic as they did not fit the traditional view of someone with an alcohol addiction, i.e. someone who needs a drink in the morning, who cannot hold down a job, or is homeless.



There's always an excuse or a justification for [her drinking]. Sometimes she would say well, alcoholics drink in the morning and it's not the morning now. I mean some days she will wait till one minute past 12 just to have that satisfaction that it's not the morning.

(Female, aged 35-54, Wales)

# What else did people feel would help those who would like to initiate a conversation about someone else's drinking?



## What did participants think might help them to overcome some of the barriers to having these conversations?

- Tips on best time and place to start conversations
- Example conversation starters, and what to say/what not to say
- Strategies to help overcome denial or defensiveness
- Guidance on how best to support people if they are receptive to help



## What did we learn from participants on how to broach the subject and what to say?

- It might be helpful to speak to other people close to the person first to see if they share the same concerns
- Giving the person some forewarning of concerns and/or the desire to have a conversation can give the person some time to digest the concerns and may mean they are less defensive and are more 'ready' to have the conversation
- Choose somewhere safe and have the conversation when all parties are sober; participants found it is sometimes easier to have a conversation when doing something else together, e.g. walking, driving, at a sporting event
- Make it clear from the start that the concerns come from a place of love and that you are there to support
- Try to stay calm, and if the conversation escalates into an argument, it may be better to leave it and come back to it at a later date
- The message may be better received if coming from someone who does not also drink in ways that could be considered problematic

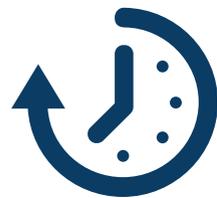
# Outcomes and impact

**What impact do the conversations have?**

# For some, these conversations have had a positive impact on the 'drinker' of concern (even if it doesn't feel like it at the time)



**Some people may immediately change their drinking habits**



**But more often, any changes take time**



**And conversations can be having an impact even if they don't feel like they are**



My friend was a bit surprised when I said I felt she was maybe drinking too much, but I think she did take it to heart; she wasn't drinking the last few times we met up. (Female, aged 35-54, England)



We are now a year and a half down the line and it's something that he talks very openly about with us. But it's taken a long time to get to that point. It was really difficult at first, but now we've broached the subject, we've kind of got over that difficult part and it is something he will talk to us about now. (Female, aged 35-44, England)



I haven't really changed my drinking but it does keep coming into my head, like a reminder, are you going to cut down? Are you going to do anything? So that conversation feels like it has had some level of impact. (High Risk Drinker, Male, aged 18-34, England)

# But others feel they have 'tried everything' and nothing seems to work

And this seems to be more likely to be with people who have got a more significant problem with alcohol.



We tried making her feel guilty, tried to make her worry about her health, tried to make her worry about her future, that maybe she won't do as well in her exams, her studies. Nothing works.

(Male, aged 55+, Wales)



I've done the softly softly approach with my brother and I've done the anger and the shock tactic. Nothing works. He will do what he wants and there's nothing I can do about it.

(Female, aged 35-54, England)



There have not been any changes, It is just a vicious circle. He doesn't want any help. He won't accept any help.

(Male, aged 35-54, Wales)

# Ultimately, the impact appears to depend on how open the drinker is to accepting that their drinking is harmful or problematic



“My aunt is in complete denial. She acted like we were lying, even though there was alcohol in her cupboards. It is almost like she has convinced herself that it wasn’t really alcohol that caused her falls. We’ve had a couple of others try to speak to her since, my cousin and our son, but we are all met with this barrier of denial. I think it is very difficult or impossible to help someone if they are in denial, unless they want to help themselves”  
(Female, aged 55+, England)



“My partner was going away with work for several months and I thought it was a good time to have a conversation. I just said are you going to try and cut down while you are away. He said he has already cut down, and while he is away he is going to try and focus on himself. It was quite a positive conversation, it gave me some hope that things will be a bit better.”  
(Female, Aged 18-34, Scotland)

# Unfortunately, these conversations can sometimes have a negative impact on relationships



Some participants who had initiated conversations with a friend or relative who was not receptive to being told of their concerns have found that it has had a detrimental impact on their relationship.



Before I had this conversation with my brother [about his drinking], we would talk at least once a week. Now we are going three or four weeks without talking to each other. There feels like there is a distance between us. I don't want to bring it up again because I feel like I am pushing him but I think for his sake I will have to bring it up again.  
(Male, aged 18-34, England)



I say it as it is, I tell him the truth. And now [my brother-in-law] doesn't want to talk to me at all. He doesn't want to listen to me so I am not exactly one of his best friends at the moment.  
(Male, aged 35-54, Wales)



I just feel so frustrated with [my daughter] because we can't help her and she just continues to drink. As long as we don't talk about her drinking, she's happy.  
(Male, aged 55+, Wales)

# Resources and support

**What support have people sought out and what would be helpful?**

# Some people reach out to peers for support and advice when concerned about someone's drinking, but few look elsewhere

Several participants had spoken to friends and family about their concerns, however very few had looked for help elsewhere (e.g. online or speaking to a health professional) about how best to help when concerned about someone else's drinking. Most people are either coping with the situation themselves alone or by talking to someone close to them. Again, very few had looked wider than this for support for themselves.



## It is good to talk, but choose who you talk to carefully

Participants' experiences of speaking to others suggest choosing who you share your concerns with is important

- People who drink excessively themselves may be more likely to belittle concerns
- Some people close to the person may be enabling their behaviour to some extent and may not be comfortable discussing it
- Online forums can be helpful, but can also turn toxic



My mum has always just said to me that it's the way your dad is, it's a treat, kind of making excuses. I've talked about it with my partner. I haven't really talked about it with friends too much to be honest, because I've always had that feeling of embarrassment. It's not something that I really have ever wanted to admit to anyone. And to be fair, he doesn't really fit what you would consider to be an alcoholic.  
(Female, aged 18-34, Scotland)

# What did the research participants feel Drinkaware could do to support people in similar situations?



## Ideas suggested by participants:

- make people aware they are not the only people in this situation
- provide a forum/helpline for people impacted or concerned by someone else's drinking
- provide tips on conversations starters, what to say/what not to say
- suggest tips on how to defuse the conversation if it becomes heated and on what to say to encourage an open conversation
- signpost to support for people impacted by alcohol
- run a campaign to encourage families to talk more about impact of someone's drinking
- provide real life stories of how people have managed to have successful conversations
- increase awareness on how to recognise that someone might be in the early stages of developing an alcohol problem
- improve public understanding of what is 'problematic' drinking and what it can look like
- start educating from a young age about what harmful drinking looks like and the harms it can have
- talk to people using 'real life language', i.e. don't talk about units



“Maybe Drinkaware should do some kind of campaign, because people don't always realise they have a real problem with alcohol.”  
(Female, aged 18-34, Wales)



“I don't think people actually know what excessive drinking is. Even when you get asked on a questionnaire like at the doctors about how many units of alcohol you drink? I don't know what a unit is then sometimes when you work it out it's a bit of a surprise that it is so high. I have read what a unit it is loads of times but I don't think I could tell you now. I couldn't tell you what the recommended maximum units is a week.”  
(High Risk Drinker, Female, aged 35-54, N. Ireland)



“A forum might be a good idea because when you are on the receiving end of someone with an alcohol addiction, the biggest thing is isolation. You feel like this is only happening to us.”  
(Female, aged 18-34, Scotland)



“In general [not related to Drinkaware], leaflets and online stuff comes across as really patronising, really condescending. It's about babying the person and treading on eggshells, but that's not realistic as we have emotions too, I get annoyed and upset.”  
(Female, aged 35-54, Wales)



“I had a conversation with a friend who said if you are smoking in an enclosed room, everybody will breathe in your smoke. Whereas if you are drinking, the person next to you isn't being affected. But I look at it in a different way. It doesn't physically affect me if my mum is drinking but it does affect me emotionally.”  
(Female, aged 35-54, Wales)

# Final reflections

# What have we learnt about 'conversations about drinking'



Talking to someone about their drinking habits and behaviours is often difficult and uncomfortable



These conversations may be easier to have if, as a society, we can reduce the stigma around alcohol use (and misuse) and normalise conversations about alcohol



A greater understanding of what a healthy and unhealthy relationship with alcohol can look like in reality might help to change conversations and make them have more impact



Conversations about these concerns need to be starting sooner rather than later - it seems that the earlier these conversations happen, the more positive an impact they can have (before people potentially develop habits or addictions that are more difficult to break)



More support should be provided, or increased awareness of support available, to those who are concerned about and/or impacted by someone else's drinking

# Interested to find out more?



## More on Drinkaware



### About Drinkaware

Drinkaware is an independent charity which aims to reduce alcohol-related harm.

<https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/about-us>



## More Drinkaware research



### Research and Impact | Drinkaware

Drinkaware ensures our work is founded in research and evidence to further promote how to reduce alcohol misuse and harm in the UK.

<https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/research>



## Advice and support



### Advice and support

We can help you learn about the impact of alcohol on you, your family or friends. Here we'll support you with advice, information and strategies to help reduce alcohol consumption and improve your health.

<https://www.drinkaware.co.uk/advice>