



# How can we help young people who experience anxiety and drink to cope?

## What is the link between anxiety and drinking?

Anxiety and alcohol use disorders are among the most common mental health disorders.



The transition out of secondary school and into young adulthood is a time of significant change for young people. The opportunities and challenges young people experience at this time include:

- Starting a new job or study program
- Establishing new friendships
- Experiencing new living situations e.g., moving out of home

For some young people, navigating these challenges can be associated with significant anxiety. It is common for anxiety symptoms to first emerge during the adolescent to early adulthood period. Young adulthood is also associated with increased access to and availability of alcohol, with almost one in three young adults consuming alcohol at hazardous levels. Alcohol is widely considered a relaxant and social lubricant, and using alcohol to reduce or cope with anxiety is commonly reported by young people. Research has confirmed the link between anxiety and drinking, finding that young people who experience anxiety symptoms are at increased risk of harmful alcohol use.

The COVID-19 pandemic and associated health, economic, and social consequences have seen a further increase in rates of anxiety and alcohol use. The pandemic brought uncertainty and stress into the lives of many Australians, and many young people reported their anxiety had gotten 'a lot worse'. Compared to before the pandemic, 70% of people reported drinking alcohol more than usual. This increase was strongly associated with stress and drinking to cope with these feelings.

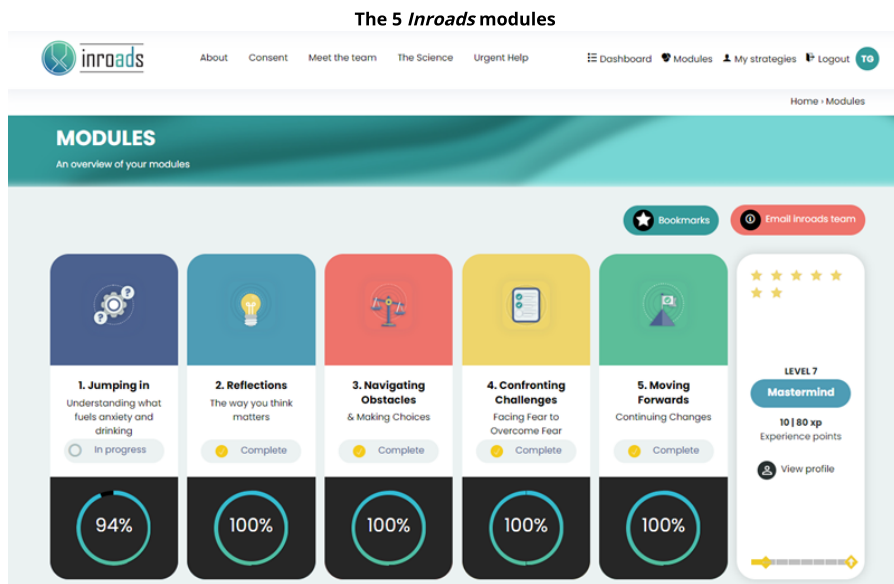
Over time, using alcohol to cope with anxiety leads to more drinking and makes anxiety symptoms worse. If not addressed, this vicious cycle between anxiety and alcohol can lead to long-term problems (e.g., health, study, work, relationships) for the young person.

## The Inroads program: helping young people aged 17-30 years

The *Inroads* program is an online early intervention that empowers young people to **manage anxiety** and keep alcohol use within safe limits through **the development of cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) coping strategies**. It is the first youth-focused program that targets:

- Anxiety symptoms
- Use of alcohol in excess of Australian health recommendations; and
- The relationship between anxiety and alcohol use.

The online format makes it easy to access the program on a computer, phone, or tablet. A self-assessment is available to help young people review their anxiety symptoms and alcohol use, to determine whether the *Inroads* program might benefit them.



## Are we making Inroads?

A recent study evaluated the effectiveness of the *Inroads* program among young Australians. A total of 123 participants were randomly assigned to two groups. One group received the *Inroads* program combined with psychologist phone/email support. The second group received an online information booklet about alcohol and safe drinking recommendations.

The study found that the *Inroads* program had significant benefits compared with providing alcohol information. For up to 6 months after receiving the *Inroads* program, young people reported:

- Reduced hazardous alcohol use
- Reduced binge-drinking
- Reduced general anxiety symptoms
- Reduced social anxiety symptoms

*Inroads* has great potential to help young people cope with anxiety symptoms and keep their alcohol use under control. The online format is especially appealing to young people. A recent survey found that young people feel empowered, confident, in control, and less concerned about privacy when accessing help via the internet.

Read more about the research and evidence behind the *Inroads* program [here](#).

## How to get involved



Now more than ever, young people require immediate and accessible support to help them develop coping skills to manage anxiety and keep alcohol use within safe limits. To meet this need, the *Inroads* program was adapted to assist young people to manage the increased uncertainty, stress, and alcohol use that young people are reporting as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

*Positive Choices* is currently supporting a free trial of the updated program. The trial is open to young people who are:

- Aged 17-30 years
- Live in Australia
- Experience anxiety
- Report hazardous levels of alcohol use

## What are the signs to look out for?

Signs of anxiety may include:

- Fear of embarrassment, looking stupid, or being the centre of attention
- Feeling persistently anxious, stressed, tense or on edge
- Worrying a lot or feeling unable to stop or control worrying
- Feeling overwhelmed by physical sensations such as racing heart, dizziness or shortness of breath

Young people may benefit from the *Inroads* program if they:

- Drink to overcome shyness or to be more confident
- Drink because they are stressed
- Worry a lot and drink alcohol to cope
- Have regrets or experience problems because of their drinking

[Click here](#) to find out more and access the program today!

If you or someone you know needs urgent help, find out more about support and crisis services [here](#). A few organisations are listed below if you need immediate assistance:

- **Lifeline:** 13 11 14 (24-hour service), online chat 7:00pm – 4:00am [lifeline.org.au/crisis-chat](https://lifeline.org.au/crisis-chat)
- **Suicide call back service:** 1300 659 467 (24-hour service), online counselling [suicidecallbackservice.org.au](https://suicidecallbackservice.org.au)
- **Counselling Online:** 1800 888 236 or [counsellingonline.org.au](https://counsellingonline.org.au), free drug and alcohol online counselling available 24/7
- **National Alcohol and Other Drug Hotline:** 1800 250 015

## Funding and the research team

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The Inroads program was developed and piloted with funding from the Society for Mental Health Research, Australian Rotary Health, and The Department of Health and Aged Care.

Currently the program is being trialled in a Randomised Controlled Trial funded by the National Health and Medical Research Council (GNT 2014729). The Chief Investigators on the NHMRC Grant are:

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