

Choosing an Alcohol Harm Reduction Goal



Kenneth Anderson - The HAMS Harm Reduction Network
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Possible Goals

- Safer Drinking
- Reduced Drinking
- Moderate Drinking
- Quitting Completely
- Baby Stepping

What is the Difference Between Moderate Drinking and Reduced Drinking

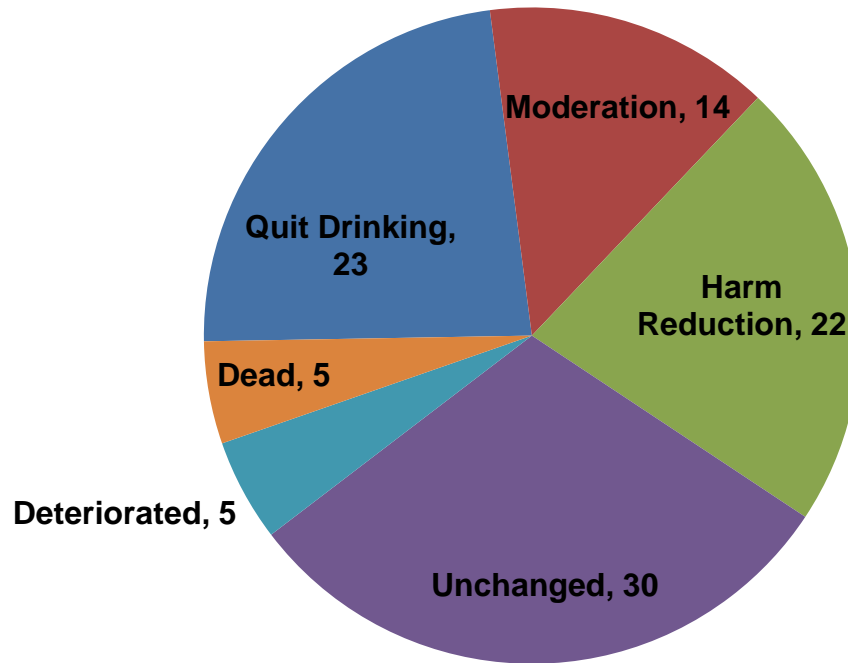
- Moderate drinking is often defined in terms of a fixed number of Standard Drinks (14 g ethanol), e. g. the NIAAA defines moderate drinking as no more than 4 standard drinks per day and 14 per week for a man and no more than 3 per day and 7 per week for a woman
- Reduced drinking can be any reduction, a person who goes from drinking 20 drinks per day to 10 per day has reduced their drinking but does not fit the government definition of moderate drinking

Bill Miller's BSCT Studies

- Bill Miller studied a controlled drinking training protocol called Behavioral Self Control Training (BSCT) and we are going to be looking at some of his data.
- Bill Miller defined Moderate Drinking in his study as drinking associated with one to zero alcohol related problems. Miller defined a Harm Reduction Outcome as a reduction in alcohol related problems which did not meet his criteria for Moderate Drinking (i. e. two or more problems remained). Miller called this "Improved But Impaired."
- Miller's study included people with a diagnosis of Alcohol Abuse and people with a diagnosis of Alcohol Dependence
- (Follow up period: 3.5 to 8 years)

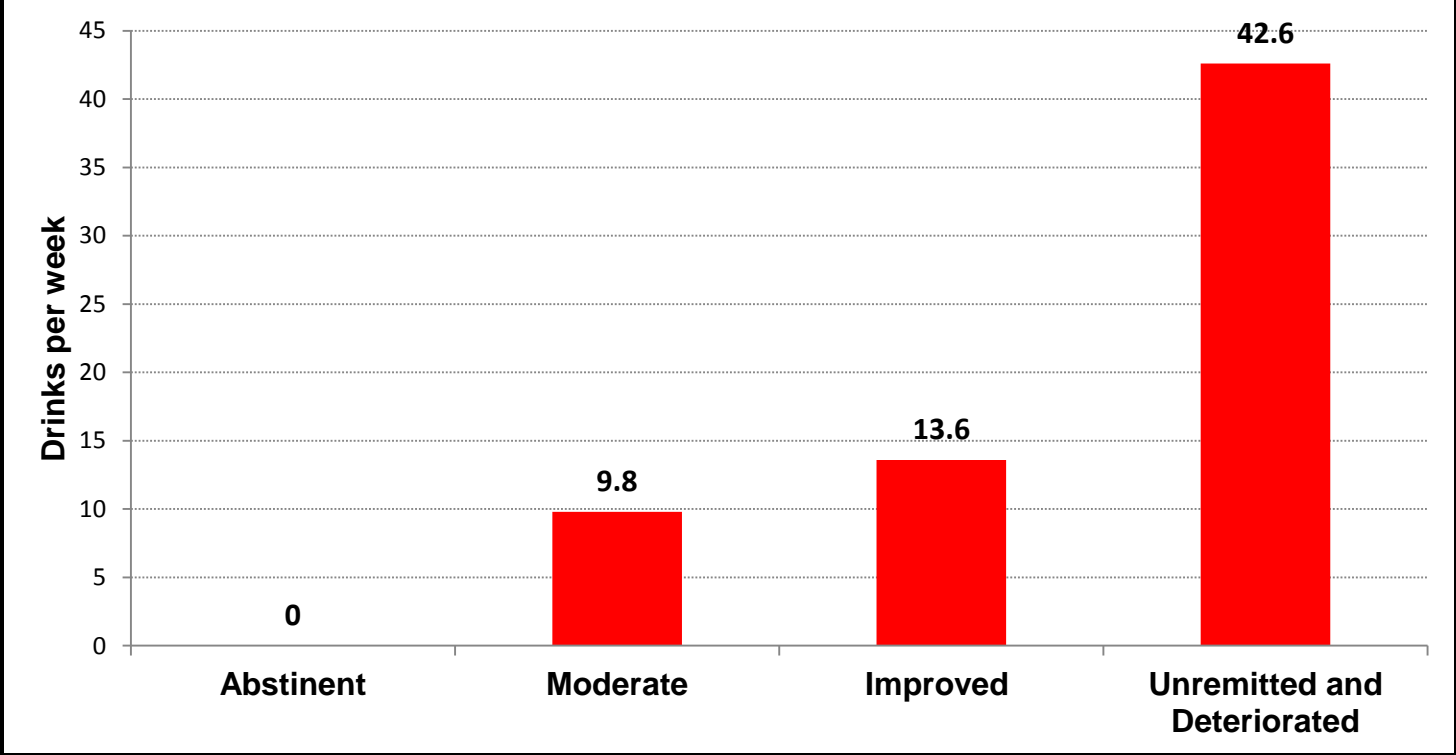
BSCT Outcomes

**Figure 1) BSCT Treatment Outcomes
For All 99 Subjects**



Drinking Levels

Figure 2) Alcohol Consumption by Outcome Type
For All 99 Subjects

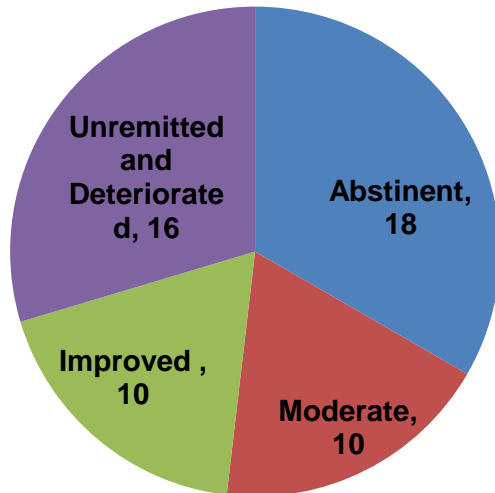


Diagnosis Does Not Determine Outcome

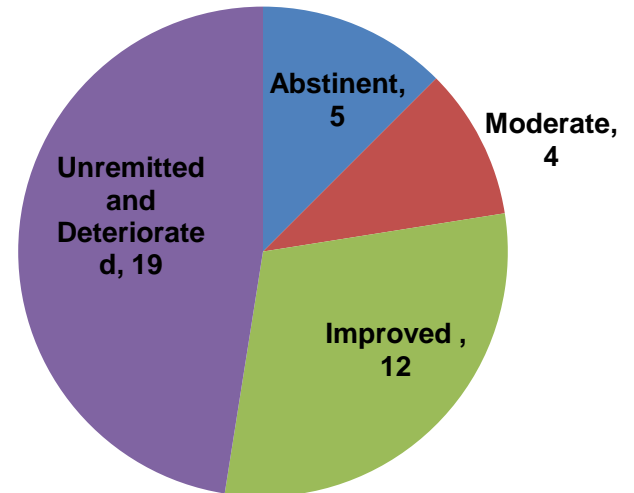
- **Moderate Drinking:** Drinkers with a diagnosis of Alcohol Dependence were just as likely to achieve a moderate drinking outcome as those with a diagnosis of Alcohol Abuse ($p = 0.38$, not significant)
- **Harm Reduction:** Drinkers with a diagnosis of Alcohol Dependence were just as likely to achieve a harm reduction outcome as those with a diagnosis of Alcohol Abuse ($p = 0.22$, not significant)

Alcohol Dependence vs. Abuse

**Alcohol Dependence:
54 Subjects**



**Alcohol Abuse:
40 Subjects**



Significant Factors

- **AA Attendance:** Successful Moderate Drinkers were significantly less likely to have attended AA during follow up than successful Abstainers ($P < .03$).
- **Rejection of the label "Alcoholic"**
- **Severity of Alcohol Dependence:** Significantly fewer drinkers with a MAST score of 19 or higher achieved Moderate Drinking outcomes; **however, severity of alcohol dependence did NOT affect harm reduction outcomes**

NESARC

- NESARC (The National Epidemiological Survey of Alcohol Related Conditions) also found that about half of people who overcame Alcohol Dependence did so by quitting and about half did so by cutting back.

Choosing a Goal

- **Safer Drinking and Reduced Drinking vs. Quitting Drinking:** Although it is possible to become a safer drinker without reducing drinking (e. g. by giving up drinking and driving without changing amounts consumed) most people who choose a controlled drinking goal choose to work on both being safer and reducing amounts. Usually the difficult decision is whether controlled drinking or quitting completely is the best goal.

If You Have Been Abstinent from Alcohol 6 Months or More

- We recommend that you use great caution before attempting controlled drinking. Do the benefits of drinking again actually outweigh the risks?

Possible Goals

- Abstinence from alcohol
- Moderate Drinking
- Harm Reduction (Narrow sense)
 - Safer drinking
 - Reduced drinking
 - Baby stepping

Possible Scenarios For Drinking Goal Choice

- Current abstainers
- Current drinkers who want to quit
- Current drinkers who want to be safer or cut back
- Current drinkers who are unable or who have no desire to quit

FOR CURRENT ABSTAINERS

- If you have been successfully abstaining from alcohol and have thereby eliminated alcohol-related harms from your life we strongly urge you to consider remaining abstinent--there is no magic bullet to insure that people who drink alcohol will never incur alcohol-related harms
- However, if you are determined to try drinking again no matter what then it is probably safer to do so within a harm reduction format perhaps with the support of a harm reduction group

People who appear most likely to succeed with drinking again are the following:

- Those whose Drug Of Choice (DOC) was something other than alcohol (e. g. heroin) who quit everything when they quit their DOC
- Those with little exposure to AA
- Those whose heavy drinking was in their youth
- Those who drank heavily in response to a certain situation such as job loss, depression, loss of a loved one, etc

People who appear less likely to succeed with drinking again are:

- Those with lots of exposure to AA
- Those with long-term, chronic alcohol problems which include many alcohol-related negative consequences
- Those whose DOC was alcohol

FOR CURRENT DRINKERS

- If you wish to pursue abstinence from alcohol and it goes well--the great! Go for it!

If you are trying to abstain and not succeeding then:

- First) Forgive yourself--if you beat yourself up for failure and make yourself miserable then you are very likely to turn a lapse into a relapse--Alan Marlatt calls this the Abstinence Violation Effect (AVE)
- Second) Have a Plan B in place when you first start abstaining so that you can be safe if you do drink again
- Third) Try not to drink impulsively on the spur of the moment--if you get a sudden urge then try to stop and make a plan of how you will drink with reduced harm before you start--don't just give in to the "fuckitts"

CURRENT DRINKERS WITH NO DESIRE TO ABSTAIN

- Make a plan for safety and or for controlling quantity
- Track risks and/or quantities

A drinking goal is always a very personal choice

- Different people have very different values, lifestyles, beliefs, and personal circumstances such as jobs, families, friends, spouses, etc
- It is also OK to quit for someone else if you want to

- It is also OK to choose abstinence from alcohol even if you are a light drinker with few consequences--if alcohol no longer fits who you are then you are free to quit
- Likewise it is OK to choose a harm reduction goal even if you are a heavy drinker with many consequences, particularly if attempts to quit lead to huge relapses with worse consequences than do attempts at controlled drinking
- We don't tell heroin users that they are only allowed to have clean needles if they maintain moderate heroin use, but that if they use addictively then they must quit and we won't give them any clean needles until they do. However, this is exactly how standard treatment protocols treat those who are unsuccessful at abstinence from alcohol

- Harm reduction is not a magic bullet to allow everyone to drink alcohol with no negative consequences
- We are all responsible for our own choices--no program can "enable" someone to drink
- For about half of heavy drinkers their best option for reduction of harm is quitting alcohol entirely

For everyone:

- Track and evaluate
- Post to a support group online, talk about it live, or write it out in a journal
- If one goal doesn't work then feel free to switch to another
- Try baby stepping
- NO SHAME

TOOLS TO HELP YOU CHOOSE

- CBA - Cost Benefit Analysis aka Decisional Balance sheet available on the HAMS web site
- SADDQ - Short Alcohol Dependence Data Questionnaire available on the HAMS web site
- STORIES- Reading stories of how others chose can be a great aid in choosing a goal--so we give some on the handout
- Ready, Willing, and Able

If You Cannot Decide If Your Best Goal Is Controlled Drinking Or Quitting

- Do a Cost Benefit Analysis (CBA, aka decisional balance sheet) to compare the pros and cons of safer and reduced drinking with the pros and cons of quitting altogether
- Use the Severity of Alcohol Dependence Questionnaire to determine the severity of your alcohol dependence. **If you are highly alcohol dependent then a HARM REDUCTION goal OR an ABSTINENCE goal may be more doable than moderate drinking**

Ready, Willing, and Able

- If you are thinking about picking a goal of quitting drinking then you might want to ask yourself if you are **Ready, Willing, and Able** to succeed with this goal. If you feel the need to strengthen your readiness, willingness, or ability then you will want to concentrate on continuing to minimize harm while you build your strengths.
- The same is true if you are considering a goal of reduced drinking or if you are a current abstainer who is thinking about drinking again. In particular, if you are thinking about drinking again it might be a very good idea to be sure that you are ready, willing, and able to do so; if you have doubts then your wisest course will be to continue to abstain from alcohol.
- It is a good exercise to get out pencil and paper and write out ways that you can increase your readiness, willingness, or ability to accomplish your chosen goal.

THANK YOU!

