

# Your guide to... healthy living

This issue is all about  
alcohol use and your health

It's not too late to  
change your drinking habits



## The Alcohol Use Issue

### ALCOHOL USE AND YOUR HEALTH

Many people can drink alcohol in moderation without doing any harm to themselves or others. Drinking alcohol can however, become harmful if you drink too much, drink every day or drink whilst doing other activities, like driving. The following definitions will help you work out whether you are drinking at harmful levels or not.



### What is harmful or high risk drinking?

**Harmful drinking is defined as drinking more than 4 drinks on any one occasion (binge drinking) or drinking more than 2 drinks per day over extended periods.**

According to the World Health Organisation, the risk of harm increases significantly when people consume more than 2 drinks per day and for more than 5 days per week.

Drinking alcohol also becomes harmful if it begins to negatively affect your relationships at home or work, or leads to financial problems. When people reach a point where they find it difficult to control their drinking and feel strong cravings for a drink they are said to have become dependent on alcohol.

Alcohol dependence or alcoholism affects a relatively small percentage of the adult population in South Africa, but many people drink at harmful or risky levels.

The harmful use of alcohol, such as binge drinking or drinking to intoxication is a major cause of:

- **Injury** - including traffic injuries, falls, drowning, burns and unintentional firearm injuries.
- **Violence** - including domestic violence, child abuse and neglect. According to SAPS statistics, more than 80% of murders and 75% of rapes in South Africa are committed by perpetrators under the influence of alcohol.
- **Risky sexual behaviour** - including unprotected sex, sex with multiple partners and sexual assault.
- **Alcohol poisoning** - a medical emergency that results from high blood alcohol levels that can cause a loss of consciousness, low blood pressure and death.
- **Chronic diseases** - over time, excessive alcohol use can lead to the development of diseases such as cancer, heart disease and mental illness. ❤️



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# The risks of harmful alcohol use:



## Long term health risks:

- **hypertension** (high blood pressure) and stroke
- **digestive problems** such as stomach ulcers and gastritis (inflammation of the stomach lining)
- **pancreatitis** (inflammation of the pancreas, which is an organ important for digestion)
- **cardiomyopathy** (weakness in the muscle of the heart)
- **liver damage** (cirrhosis of the liver, alcoholic hepatitis)
- **cancer**, including cancer of the mouth, throat, colon, throat, liver, prostate and breast
- **brain damage** (memory loss, slowing of mental functions, reduced attention span)
- **impotence**
- **psychiatric problems** such as depression, anxiety and suicide
- **TB** (heavy alcohol use damages the immune system and makes people more susceptible to getting TB)
- **HIV** (alcohol consumption increases risky sexual behaviour and can accelerate the progression of HIV related disease because it suppresses the immune system. Heavy drinkers also forget to take their prescribed medication)



## The immediate effects of excessive alcohol use:

- **slow reaction time**
- **slurred speech**
- **loss of memory**
- **poor balance and co-ordination**
- **lack of inhibition** (lack of control of emotions and reactions)
- **nausea and vomiting**
- **blackouts and hangovers**
- **anger and belligerence**
- **loss of consciousness or coma**

## The benefits of giving up:

- **reducing the risk of many serious health problems**
- **reducing the risk of accidents and getting into trouble with the law**
- **more money to spend on other things**
- **feeling happier and more in control of one's life**
- **better relationships with family, friends and work colleagues**
- **being a reliable person that others can depend on**
- **more energy and time to do other things**
- **remembering experiences**
- **not having to regret or feel embarrassed about your behaviour** ❤️

# LEWINA'S STORY

Read about Lewina's journey to better health after breast cancer



**Cancer. Something you never imagine will happen to you. Lewina Rowland explains the moment she first discovered lumps in her breast: "I was watching Three Talk on SABC3 with Noleen. It was breast cancer awareness month and they explained how to detect a lump. So I tried it, and I felt one or two lumps. I couldn't believe it!"**

A mammogram and a needle biopsy confirmed traces of cancer. "I was shocked out of my mind, but I was determined to be strong", says Lewina. She had a biopsy of breast tissue the following week. "When they finally confirmed that I had stage two breast cancer, I was advised to go for a mastectomy, chemotherapy and radiotherapy. "Less than two months after watching Three Talk, I was going for a mastectomy on my left breast."

After her operation, Lewina went back to her old routine: "I was determined that cancer wasn't going to change me. I wanted to be in control of my life. I was very dedicated to my work, and I didn't think much about what had happened to me. I fell into this pattern of rushing around everywhere and keeping myself very, very busy. When I came to a standstill, I would go to a friend's house and have a glass of wine to unwind."

However, a few years after Lewina was diagnosed with cancer, she became very depressed. It was her sister who drew her attention to her lifestyle: "She told me that I was going through life as if there was no end to what I could do, rushing around as though I hadn't suffered a life threatening illness. She reminded me that it had happened for a reason."

That was a wake-up call for Lewina: "I realised that if I didn't slow down, I was heading for a repeat of the cancer. I was working too hard, and letting off steam with friends by having a glass of wine. I didn't connect what was

happening. For me, rushing was just part of my life, and I enjoyed the excitement. There were lots of things that I was doing very unconsciously, such as drinking, partying, and eating what I wanted to."

Gradually, Lewina changed her lifestyle: "I moved away from my friends who involved me in that kind of party lifestyle, and I became closer to people who were more health conscious. Priorities shifted in my life." Getting back into exercise played a big part in changing Lewina's life around: "I had stopped exercising after being diagnosed with cancer. At first it was difficult to get back into it, but I started by taking a friend's three dogs for regular walks, or asking friends to go for walks on the beach, which I enjoyed. When I started a new job 23 kilometres away from home, it provided me with the opportunity to take the train, to save on travelling costs and to start walking to and from the train station on my way to work. In time, I felt my fitness improve."

Last year Lewina joined the Dragon Boat Team, AmaBele Belles, which is made up of breast cancer survivors. "We paddle twice a week, and I benefit not only from the exercise, but also from spending time with people who understand what it's like to go through getting breast cancer. After the first time in the boat, I realised it was something that I should have been part of long ago."

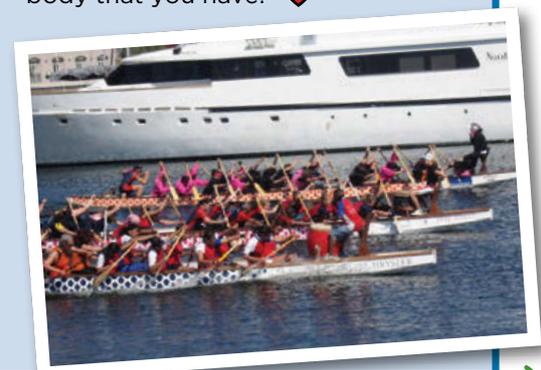
Living a healthy lifestyle is now a family affair for Lewina: "Everyone in my family has had some kind of health issue, from diabetes to high blood pressure. A month after I was diagnosed with cancer, my brother died after having two strokes. His death was tied to his lifestyle. We have now all changed our habits: we don't add sugar to sweet potato; we take the skin off the chicken; drink water instead of fizzy cool drinks, and walk

**"I realised that if I didn't slow down, I was heading for a repeat of the cancer..."**

for exercise. My family is very supportive. We hold each other accountable."

Lewina has a more relaxed approach to life now: "I'm busier with things that I want to do, rather than things that I feel I should do. I've realised that it's okay to say no, now and then. I do have a glass of wine sometimes, but only when it is Christmas time or somebody's birthday. I don't drink alcohol to unwind anymore."

Lewina advises fellow cancer survivors, "I would caution against wanting to bounce back as fast as you can. You need to take stock of the underlying health issues that caused the cancer. I rushed through cancer, like everything else. I didn't realise that I was supposed to get the message that I couldn't go on eating and drinking like I had been. Now I understand that you must be careful with the body that you have." ❤️



# Who should avoid using alcohol altogether?

It is recommended that pregnant women should not drink any alcohol at all because it can cause very serious brain damage and physical abnormalities in the unborn baby (a condition known as Fetal Alcohol Syndrome or FAS).

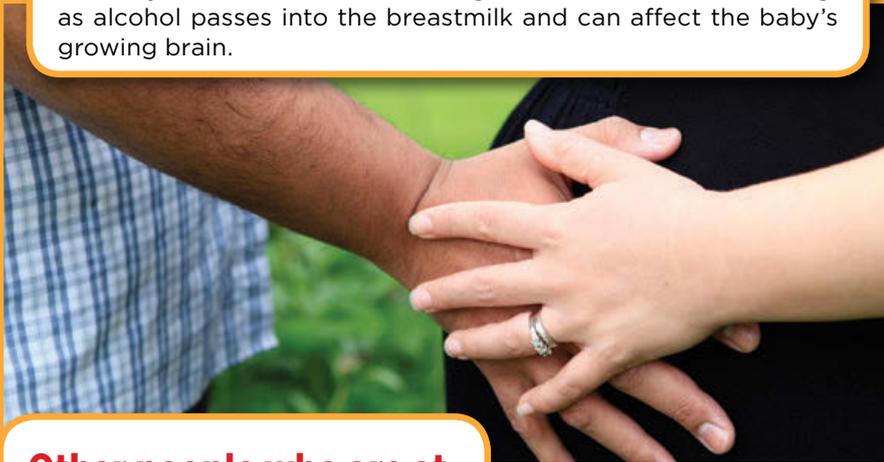
Babies with FAS have severe learning and behavioural difficulties, which last for the rest of their lives. They can also have heart defects and abnormalities in the arms, legs, kidneys, ears and eyes.

Not many people realise that even drinking a small amount of alcohol at a critical time in pregnancy can damage the baby in this way. There is no level of drinking alcohol during pregnancy that can be considered safe.

Even ciders, Brutal Fruits, Smirnoff Spins and traditional beers have enough alcohol in them to cause harm.

FAS is totally preventable. If you do not drink alcohol while you are pregnant, your baby will not get FAS.

Similarly, it is best to avoid drinking alcohol when breastfeeding, as alcohol passes into the breastmilk and can affect the baby's growing brain.



## Other people who are at very high risk and should rather avoid drinking alcohol altogether are those who:

- Have a history of liver disease
- Have pancreatitis
- Have HIV
- Have heart problems
- Have uncontrolled high blood pressure
- Have high cholesterol or triglyceride levels
- are overweight
- are on medication that reacts with alcohol
- are operating machinery or driving

# What is low risk drinking?

In order to avoid the risks to your health:

**Women should not have more than one standard drink a day.**

**Men should not have more than two standard drinks a day.**

(A standard drink is one medium glass of beer or wine or one small glass of spirits).

It is also recommended that one should avoid drinking any alcohol at all for at least 2 days a week.

There is some evidence of health benefits for low alcohol consumption for older adults, but it remains inconclusive and may not benefit everyone. These benefits can also be gained by exercise and diet.



## Alcohol and young people

Young people under the age of 18 are at the greatest risk of harm from drinking. Drinking significantly increases their risk of dying in a traffic accident, getting infected with HIV, becoming a victim of violent crime, and affects their performance at school. It is safest for young people to delay starting to drink as long as possible. An individual who begins drinking heavily as a teenager is four times more likely to develop alcohol dependence than someone who waits until adulthood. ❤️

# Is your drinking putting you at risk of disease or injury?

Answering the questionnaires below will help you assess whether you are drinking at harmful levels of not. Remember that a drink refers to a 'standard' drink.

## What is a standard drink?

It is important to note that often bottles/cans/glasses contain more than one standard drink. If you share bottles or containers with homemade or traditional drinks like umqomboti or inkumpa it may be difficult to calculate a standard drink. The table below can help you estimate the number of standard drinks you are drinking.



### Beer

4.9% alcohol  
Medium beer glass or bottle  
285 mls



### Wine

12% alcohol  
Medium wine glass  
120 mls



### Spirits

40% alcohol  
Small glass  
30 mls

## Alcohol Use Disorders Identification Test (AUDIT-C)

1. How often do you have a drink containing alcohol?	Never	0
	Monthly or less	1
	2-4 times a month	2
	2-3 times a week	3
	4 or more times a week	4
2. How many standard drinks do you have on a typical day when you are drinking?	1 or 2	0
	3 or 4	1
	5 or 6	2
	7, 8 or 9	3
	10 or more	4
3. How often do you have 6 or more drinks on any one occasion?	Never	0
	Less than monthly	1
	Monthly	2
	Weekly	3
	Daily or almost daily	4

Add your score from questions 1–3 **Total**

**Scoring:** A score of 5 or more is considered positive for harmful drinking

## The CAGE Questionnaire for alcohol use (Ewing, 1987)

QUESTIONS	YES	NO
Have you ever felt you should cut down on your drinking?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have people annoyed you by criticizing your drinking?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you felt bad or guilty about your drinking?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have you ever had a drink first thing in the morning to steady your nerves or get rid of a hangover (eye-opener)?	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

**Scoring:** The answers to the questions are scored 0 for "no" and 1 for "yes". A total score of 2 or greater is considered indicative of harmful alcohol use. 4 positive answers suggests alcohol dependence.

# What is alcoholism or alcohol dependence?

Someone who is dependent on alcohol will:

feel strong urges for a drink

struggle to limit their drinking

need to drink more before feeling drunk

continue to drink despite repeated negative effects on their health, their relationships, their work or their finances

experience withdrawal symptoms when they stop drinking

## You probably do not have a problem with drinking alcohol if:

- you drink alcohol only at generally accepted social occasions
- can decide to stop drinking even when there is still plenty to drink
- don't feel shame, guilt or embarrassment after drinking
- don't have conflict with others about your drinking
- don't break drinking and driving laws
- don't put yourself and others at risk as a result of drinking
- you never lie about your drinking





**“At AA, no-one tells you what to do, but you hear everyone’s stories and you realise, ja, that also happened to me.”**

**Read about how joining the AA transformed Paul’s life**

## **PAUL’S STORY**

**Paul, who lives in Cape Town, enjoys the simple things in life, such as a meal at home with his girlfriend, reading a book, or going for a Sunday walk in the forest. However, it has been a long journey to be able to take pleasure in these everyday things. Paul has been a recovering alcoholic for seven years.**

How did it all start? Paul says, “I didn’t really drink at school because I was very involved with sport. The few times that I did, I’d end up vomiting, waking up the next day feeling awful and thinking I’ll never do that again. However, things changed when I left school. At varsity, I fell in with a group that partied a lot. Everyone drank. Over time, drinking became a way of life.”

After varsity, Paul got engaged to someone who also drank. We

both knew that we probably drank too much, but we believed that we were keeping a handle on it. We didn’t lose our jobs, we bought a house, we paid our bills. But then our relationship started to go wrong and my fiancé left me. It was then that I crossed that invisible line, and started taking drugs too.”

Although Paul carried on working, he stopped paying the bond on his house. “The bank told me I was going to lose my house, but I stopped caring. I got into a lot of financial trouble, borrowing money I couldn’t repay, stealing money from people close to me, and doing all sorts of dodgy stuff. I would wake up feeling remorseful and guilty, with no memory of the previous night. I could not deal with my feelings, so would turn to drink or drugs again. The wheel started spinning faster and faster.”

“I knew that I had a problem, but I didn’t know what to do about it. I was brought up in a home where we didn’t talk about very personal things and were not supposed to show our emotions. My dad used to say things like, “come on, man, what’s wrong with you? Are you a man or a mouse? Pull yourself together.” Ultimately, I think this meant that I did not have the coping skills for adulthood. I wasn’t able to take responsibility for my own life. I blamed others for everything that went wrong.”

When Paul lost both his house and his job, he had to move in with his brother. “I told him I needed to stay for a month or two. After 18 long months, my brother became desperate. He set up a meeting with the two of us and a psychiatrist. I don’t remember the detail of that

meeting, but, basically, they confronted me with my lies and delusions. I got the picture for the first time that I was actually quite an unhealthy, dysfunctional person.

“That night my brother said to me, okay, so you’re going into rehab tomorrow. I came up with all kinds of excuses. Then my brother did something which was really difficult for him, because he was quite an ‘enabler’, a soft touch and he doesn’t like confrontation. He put his foot down, He just said, “OK, that’s it. You’re not staying here anymore.” I said, “well, where do you expect me to go?” And he said. “I don’t care. In fact, pack your stuff now. I’m going to take you to the night shelter.” I was so shocked! I was like, oh my God...” I said, “okay, I think rehab’s not a bad idea. Anyway, so that is how I ended up in rehab.”

As part of rehab, Paul was sent to AA (Alcoholics Anonymous) meetings. It was these meetings that proved to be life changing for him.

“At AA, no-one tells you what to do, but you hear everyone’s stories and you realise, ja, that also happened to me. I came to understand that I was not in control of my drinking and that everything that had turned out badly in my life was as a result of it – the car accidents, getting locked up, dropping out of varsity, failed relationships, missed job opportunities – the list is endless.”

“I realised that I had lost contact with really good friends and that I had also missed out on important family occasions. For example, I missed my brother’s 50th birthday because I was too busy getting pissed with my mates. There were many people that I needed to reach out and make amends to.”

Paul has been sober and clean now for seven years. “For the first two years, I went to an AA meeting pretty much every day. The AA’s 12 step programme was a huge help. It made me look at myself really honestly, and take responsibility for my feelings.”

Paul has come to realise that the root of the problem is his fear of failure. “I have this huge fear of rejection, of not fitting in. I worry that I am not good enough. Drinking gave me confidence, took away my inhibitions, and made me feel like I belonged. But then it took over my life. By sharing my story with others at the AA, I realised that there are many of us who feel that way and that we can help each other.”

Life is so much better for Paul today. “I don’t wake up in the morning with a sense of dread anymore, wondering what I did or what I said last night. I’m in the first meaningful relationship that I’ve ever had. I have managed to pay off all my debt and have bought myself a car and an apartment. I remind myself every day that I’m powerless over alcohol, and that by not drinking, I give myself so many other choices.”

“I don’t go to pubs anymore and I don’t hang out with my old drinking friends. And the amazing thing is I don’t miss it. I’ve reconnected with my old mates and they have been very supportive.

“Things like integrity, being true to oneself and helping others, these are things that are important to me today. In the past, it was all about having money, a big house and holidays.”

Paul is now involved in setting up life-skills programmes to help young people. His new passion is to make a positive difference in other people’s lives. “Having this project is really important. It gives me the motivation to get out of bed every morning and look forward to the day ahead.” ❤️

## Do you want to quit or reduce drinking, but worry that you can’t?

**You might really want to quit or reduce your drinking, but worry that you don’t have the willpower to do it on your own. Talking to a healthcare professional about your drinking can help you feel more motivated and confident. A good start is to talk to your GP or the doctor at your local clinic. If you have scored 4 on the CAGE questionnaire, you may be dependent on alcohol and may need further help from a specialist healthcare professional with experience in treating addiction. You may also benefit from medication to help with the withdrawal symptoms.**

Your GP can refer you to an appropriate healthcare professional. You can also contact an organisation like SANCA or Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) directly (see contact details on page 12). AA groups exist in every city and town of South Africa and joining does not cost anything. These groups have helped thousands of people with alcohol problems and offer on-going support.



# The 7 step plan for changing your drinking habits



## STEP 1: Identify your reasons to change

Being clear about the reasons why YOU would like to stop or reduce your drinking is an important first step in changing your habits. Take a look at the list below and tick off the ones that apply to you:

- I will feel more in control of my life
- I will feel less guilty and ashamed
- My relationships with my family will improve
- My performance at work will improve
- I will be a more reliable person
- I will be a more honest person
- I will sleep better
- I will lose weight
- I will be in better health and have more energy
- I will reduce my risk of alcohol related illness and injury
- My memory will improve
- I will save money
- I will be less aggressive
- I will spend more quality time with my kids and family
- I can start taking better care of my health (by for example, exercising and eating better)
- I will be a good role model for my children

Other reasons:

It may also be helpful to think about **what you will miss** if you give up drinking or significantly reduce your drinking and write these down too:

## STEP 2: Set you goals

If you are dependent on alcohol, quitting altogether is the most appropriate goal. If you are intending to reduce your drinking, it is helpful to plan on which days you will allow yourself a drink and set a limit to the number of drinks you have on those days.

Remind yourself of the recommendations for low risk drinking (see page 4). Aim to have at least 2 alcohol free days a week and try to avoid drinking more than 4 (women) or 5 (men) drinks on any one occasion.

Keeping a record of your drinking habits will help you understand your drinking patterns and identify how to change them. Make plans and write down your goals at least one week ahead.

My goals this week:



## STEP 3: Get help

Think about someone you are close to and trust who can give you support while you are trying to make the change. Someone who has been through the experience of reducing or quitting alcohol might be particularly helpful and understanding. You can also make an appointment to see a health-care professional or counsellor, or join a support group like the AA (see contact details on page 12).

If you are worried that you are physically dependent on alcohol and may experience withdrawal symptoms, discuss options for medication with a doctor or addiction specialist.



## STEP 4: Recognise risky situations

In order to prepare yourself to change your drinking habits, it is often helpful to think about the situations that make you want to drink or drink too much. The list below describes some common situations. Tick off the ones that apply to you:

- Relaxing after the work day
- Going out to a tavern/bar/club
- Meeting new people
- Eating out
- Braaing at home or a friend's house
- Watching sport on TV
- Feeling lonely/depressed
- Socialising with friends who drink
- Feeling anxious/stressed out
- After an argument or conflict
- Feeling angry and frustrated
- Feeling bored
- Celebrating a special occasion



Other situations:

Lined area for writing other situations.



## STEP 5: Plan to avoid 'drinking situations'

Avoiding those situations that make you want to drink or where you usually lose control over your drinking will make changing your drinking habits easier.

If you have the habit of going to the tavern/pub after work – plan a different activity after work. For example go to the gym, go for a walk, visit family or friends or go out for a coffee.

If you drink heavily with friends – plan to socialise with friends who don't drink as much.

If you drink when you are alone and feeling low – plan to spend more time with other people, join a community organisation, church group, choir or local club.

If you drink when you are bored and frustrated – plan to do other activities in your life. For example, take up a new hobby or interest, join a charity organisation, participate in sport or join an adult education class.

If you drink when you are stressed or upset – try other ways to calm down. For example, learn how to relax by using deep breathing techniques or doing yoga, playing sport or doing physical activity like walking or dancing.

If you drink heavily when you are feeling anxious or depressed, speak to your doctor or phone Lifeline or the SA Depression and Anxiety Support Group (see contact details at the end of this leaflet).



Other ways of avoiding risky situations:



## STEP 6: Learning other strategies

There are several other strategies that can help you reduce your drinking without anyone even noticing:

Quench your thirst by drinking water or a non-alcoholic drink before you start drinking alcohol

Eat before you start drinking. This will make you feel full and help you drink less. Food also slows down the absorption of alcohol

Have non-alcoholic drinks between every alcoholic one

Take small sips of your drink, rather than gulps

Dilute your alcoholic drink with soda or mixers

Choose drinks with a lower alcohol content

Avoid eating salty snacks while drinking as these make you thirsty



## STEP 7: Preventing relapse

There will be times when you will find it difficult to stick to your plans. If you feel strong physical cravings, understand that they are a normal part of the process and usually only last a few minutes at a time. Think of ways to distract yourself when you feel a craving. For example, you may need to remove yourself from a situation that is tempting you to drink and do something different. Doing regular physical activity or exercise, eating a healthy diet and getting enough sleep all help reduce cravings.

If you experience symptoms such as sweating, heart palpitations and muscular pains, understand that these are common withdrawal symptoms and seek advice from a healthcare professional. Medication can also help.

**The best way to break bad habits is to take one day at a time. Tell yourself that you will not drink today and that you will cope with not drinking for that one day. Then do the same the next day. Avoid thinking of the long term.**

If you do relapse and break your commitment to not drink again or control your drinking, learn from the experience. Understand why it happened and immediately renew your commitment to change. Rather than see relapse as a failure, understand that it is a normal part of the behaviour change process and see it as an opportunity to learn more about what triggers the old behaviour and how to prevent it from happening again. It will gradually get easier.

It may also help to think of past challenges or bad habits in your life and how you managed to overcome or change them. Think about what you learnt from these experiences and the personal qualities you have that helped you get through them.



*Write about what happened when you relapsed:*

A spiral-bound notebook with several blank, lined pages for writing.



# Where to go for help



## SA National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence (SANCA)

**Toll Free Number:** 086 14 SANCA / 086 14 72622

**Telephone:** 011 892 3829

**E-mail:** [sancanational@telkomsa.net](mailto:sancanational@telkomsa.net)

**Website:** <http://sancanational.org>

## Alcoholics Anonymous

**National Helpline:** 0861 HELP AA (435-722)\*

**Website:** [aasouthafrica.org.za](http://aasouthafrica.org.za)

## Lifeline South Africa

**A 24 hours professional counselling service for 365 days a year**

**Website:** [www.lifeline.org.za](http://www.lifeline.org.za)

**Telephone:** 086 132 2322

## SA Depression and Anxiety Group

**Helpline (8am – 8pm, 7 days a week):** 0800 20 50 26 or 011 262 6396

**Website:** [www.sadag.org](http://www.sadag.org)

## Department of Social Development

**24 Hour Substance Abuse Helpline:** 0800 12 13 14



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