

## Guide to Moderation Management Steps of Change

### Introduction

Many of the people who look into MM have already tried to get rid of their drinking problem with a big, all-at-once effort of the will – but without success. This program takes quite a different approach. The better approach is to break the change process down into a number of smaller, more manageable steps. With the step-by-step approach you gain a sense of confidence, direction and momentum as you go along. One step builds on another until at the end you have a powerful set of tools for managing your drinking behavior. And the process outlined here encourages you to customize many parts to your own situation. So you wind up with a set of control skills that really suits you as an individual, and supports a healthier, more rewarding lifestyle.

### The MM Step-by-Step Approach

Here's an outline of the steps. The order in which you undertake these steps isn't critical, but it's a good idea to spend at least a little time working with each of them:

1. Start keeping a diary of your drinking, to help learn how your problems with drinking occur.
2. Look at the limits of drinking for moderate drinkers, and some of the practices and attitudes that go with moderate drinking, to get a clear picture of the moderation objective.
3. With that clear picture of what moderation looks like, consider whether moderation or abstinence seems the better objective for you. Also score your problem severity with a self-test, and consider other factors, to see whether moderation would be workable for you.
4. Make an extensive list of the problems drinking has caused you, and the benefits you expect from moderation, to strengthen your resolve.
5. Start on a period of abstinence of 30 days or more, to experience the positives of non-drinking. During this period away from alcohol you can work through some steps to help you achieve moderation.
  - a. Learn skills for avoiding drinking on occasions when you choose not to drink.
  - b. Learn skills to control drinking on occasions when you do drink.
  - c. Identify the key triggers that lead you to over-drink, and develop means to neutralize those triggers.
  - d. Develop your own personal rules that will keep your drinking moderate.
  - e. Identify and start new spare-time activities that will displace drinking in your life.
6. At the end of your period of abstinence, you can start drinking again cautiously, being mindful of your limits and personal rules for drinking. Maintain a high degree of attention to your drinking during this period, including keeping a diary.
7. If and when you have slips, do a post-mortem to see what went wrong, and change your personal drinking guidelines if necessary.

## Your Drinking Diary

Getting your drinking under control requires that you pay extra attention to the subject over a fair period of time. Keeping a drinking diary is a great tool for that. If you're not ready to start an abstinence period yet, you'll benefit from starting your diary right now. And you'll also keep one when you resume drinking after your abstinence period.

Here are the headings, and a full-page printable copy is at the end of this paper:

<u>Date</u>	<u># of Drinks</u>	<u>What Drink</u>	<u>Time Spent Drinking</u>	<u>The Occasion</u>	<u>Feelings at the Time, and/or Positive Activities Progress</u>
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This diary will give you an objective record of your drinking behavior, and help you find the circumstances that lead to your over-drinking. Under "The Occasion" record the time of day, and where and with whom you were drinking. Your "Feelings at the Time" are likely to be important, so note those. And, as discussed later, "Positive Activities" may include your drinking management tools.

### What is Moderate Drinking?

Moderate drinking, first of all, means keeping drinking quantities under specific limits. Quantities are expressed in terms of customary standard-sized drinks. The standard drink here is one twelve-ounce bottle of regular (5% alcohol) beer, 5 ounces of table wine (12%), or 1.5 ounces of 80-proof liquor (40%).

The Drinking Limits are:

For Men: No more than 14 drinks per week, and not more than 4 per occasion.

For Women: Not more than 9 drinks per week, and not more than 3 per occasion.

For Both: Do not drink on more than 3-4 days per week.

Research has shown that these limits are generally workable for persons who have learned to moderate after experiencing drinking problems. These limits are mostly the same as those set forth by the US government's National Institute for Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism. However, NIAAA gives a similar but slightly lower weekly limit for women of 7 drinks per week (with the same 3 per occasion), so women might want to adopt that lower weekly limit.

Note that these are upper limits rather than usual quantities. A usual quantity for a moderator is more likely to be 1-2 drinks per occasion, as a matter of individual choice. Blood alcohol levels are critical, since judgment and control are progressively lost at higher levels. Also, alcohol causes most of its physical damage at higher blood levels. MM sets 0.055% as the upper limit for blood alcohol concentration.

As well as the quantity consumed, the pace of drinking directly affects blood alcohol levels. A pace of not more than one drink per half hour helps with that. Having something to eat while drinking also helps, slowing down the uptake of alcohol into the bloodstream. The blood level also varies according to weight and sex, with heavier people getting lower levels from a given intake, and men lower levels than women. It happens that men's bodies

have a higher % water, that readily dilutes alcohol, whereas women have a higher % lipids in their bodies.

You can look at a set of tables of blood alcohol levels for men and women of different weights from a given amount and pace of alcohol intake via the *moderation.org* website. Click on “Blood Alcohol Content” under the “Tools for Moderation” heading on the website’s home page.

The MM upper limit of 0.055% blood alcohol compares with the legal upper limit for driving in most states of 0.080%. It’s vital to obey your state’s driving blood alcohol limit, and the safest practice is not to drink and drive at all.

These MM limits may strike you as stingy, but the good news is that with alcohol, less is better. The positive effects of alcohol are pretty much limited to moderate intakes in line with the MM guidelines. Drinking larger amounts, or too quickly, brings on loss of ability to fully experience what is going on, loss of control, and other negative effects. And a habit of drinking larger amounts blunts the ability to feel the positive effects of smaller amounts. You can regain that sensitivity by practicing moderation. So with moderation you can capture the benefits of drinking while avoiding the negatives.

Besides these quantitative limits, there are key attitude and lifestyle factors that go with and sustain moderate drinking behavior. Audrey Kishline, founder of Moderation Management, made up a list of these key factors back in 1994, and the list still works very well today.

The moderate drinker:

- Usually does not exceed the 0.055% blood alcohol concentration drinking limit.
- Generally has something to eat before, during, or soon after drinking.
- Usually does not drink faster than one drink per half hour.
- Usually does not drink for longer than an hour or two on any particular occasion.
- Considers an occasional drink to be a small, though enjoyable, part of life.
- Has hobbies, interests, and other ways to relax and enjoy life, that do not involve alcohol.
- Usually has friends who are moderate drinkers or non-drinkers.
- Feels comfortable with his or her use of alcohol (never drinks secretly and does not spend a lot of time thinking about drinking or planning to drink).

## Your Choice of Moderation or Abstinence

A critical factor for your chance of successfully moderating is the severity of your problem. An NIAAA study comparing outcomes for persons grouped by severity showed clearly the importance of that factor. The NIAAA study followed up after three years on a group diagnosed with the most severe stage, commonly called “alcoholics,” and a group at the next stage of severity, called “alcohol abuse.” It turned out that 25% of the alcoholics had resolved their problem, by learning to drink at safe levels or by becoming abstinent, but more than twice as many of the abusers, or 59%, had accomplished that in the three years.

So for an objective score on the severity of your drinking problem, complete and score yourself on the “Alcohol Dependence Questionnaire” available thru the *moderation.org* website main page under the “Tools” heading. If you score 20 or above, your best bet is abstinence. With a score of 16-19, you may want to see a therapist for support in your work with drinking, including dealing with any non-alcohol issues that complicate your situation. Needless to say, you also should not continue to drink if you have physical or psychological problems that don’t allow drinking.

If you’re passed the severity test for trying moderation, you may also want to look at the various pros and cons of both moderation and abstinence.

Moderation of course has the advantages a) that you can still enjoy alcohol, albeit under controlled circumstances, b) that in learning moderation you will learn some self-control skills useful elsewhere in your life, and c) that you can still fit comfortably into social situations involving drinking. Negatives include a) continued exposure to a substance that has given you real problems, b) the fact that learning moderation will take a fairly significant effort over time, and c) maybe the objections of others who want you to just stop drinking. You can doubtless think of a number of other pros and cons.

Abstinence has the advantages of a) taking you completely away from the drinking problem, b) being much more simple and clear to carry out, and c) saving all the cost of alcohol. Its negatives include a) losing the pleasures of drinking, b) possible awkwardness in social situations involving drinking, and c) leaving you unprepared if you do make a slip back into drinking. Again, you can come up with others.

Most are reading this because of interest in learning moderation, so we don’t expect this exercise to change many minds. But it may give you an inkling that abstinence, your fall-back if moderation doesn’t work down the line, is not such a bad thing after all. You’ll get direct experience of abstinence if you do the recommended 30-day non-drinking period. And later when moderating you’ll have some non-drinking days each week.

## Building Commitment

To help build the commitment to carry through with successful change, it's helpful to go through two very personal exercises. One is to think through an extensive list of all the problems over-drinking has caused you. The other is to think through all the benefits you expect from achieving moderation.

The listing of problems from drinking is not meant to punish you – MM knows that positive motivations are stronger in the long run than negatives. But taking a quick look at the real extent of your problems with drinking at this stage will help move you forward. The trick here is to think through a list of various aspects of your life, and to see how drinking has affected each. So think about areas such as: your inner feelings, relationships with others, work issues, physical health, your finances, any legal issues, and spare time or recreation. You may be surprised to find how drinking has invaded and caused some harms in so many aspects of your life. Just recognize for once the extent of the negatives, shudder, and then move on.

The listing of benefits you expect from moderation may have some surprises on the upside. And the good news is that you will probably discover and appreciate more benefits as you go along in learning to moderate.. So again, work through a list of different aspects of your life. Under health, if your sleep isn't good when over-drinking, you'll probably get a benefit. Your appearance will doubtless improve without the stress of over-drinking. Heavier people may take off some weight without those extra calories. This list of benefits from moderation is important enough that it will pay you to put it in writing, and add to it as you go along.

## Your Very Own “30”

The early abstinence period in MM is simply called “The 30” by many in the program. It can be hard to get started, but there are a number of big benefits:

- You may well feel demoralized by your lack of control over drinking, and feel powerless relative to your drinking habit. When you stop drinking, suddenly you feel, and you are, back in charge.
- You get a space unclouded by alcohol to further develop your resolve for a new lifestyle, to work out your own drinking ground-rules and control strategies, and to get them firmly in mind.
- You'll enjoy the positive experiences of life without alcohol, which will help give drinking a smaller role in your mind.
- You'll learn how to say “no” to alcohol. That's important because as a moderator you won't drink on many days, and you'll refuse drinks on occasions when you've reached your limit.
- You'll see while cold sober how people really act while over-drinking. You'll take away some mental snapshots of behaviors you'd especially like to avoid.
- While drinking heavily, your tolerance for alcohol increases, so you need more for the same effect. Abstinence restores your sensitivity to alcohol, so that less is enough.

Many people who bring over-drinking under control on their own just taper down their drinking over time. But as you can see, there are very powerful advantages for an abstinence period of 30 days or more.

If you feel quite unready to start an abstinence period right now, don't force it. Keep mulling the idea over in your mind, and most likely at some point you will feel ready. Or you can start with shorter periods of non-drinking, and then go for a full month.

### Learning Skills for Non-Drinking During Your "30"

As well as planning ahead for how you will manage drinking after the "30", it's a time to learn skills for the many occasions in the future when you will choose not to drink.

You may feel uneasy about drawing attention to yourself when you refuse a drink. It's best to have a few phrases ready in mind, such as: "No thanks, I'm on a diet," or "No thanks, I've got an early one tomorrow," or "No thanks, I'm the driver tonight," or just "No thanks, not tonight." You'll be pleasantly surprised how little most people are concerned. Those who do make it an issue often turn out to have drinking issues of their own. So you'll have learned that those particular people won't fit easily with your new lifestyle.

A major skill area for non-drinking is dealing with urges to drink. Techniques here include "avoidance", "confrontation" and "distraction."

"Avoidance" involves keeping away from things that give you drinking urges. Instead of having alcohol ready at hand in the house, you might want to keep it out of the house at this time, or put away or locked up in some inconvenient place. Don't spend time with heavy-drinking friends, or go to places like bars where you customarily drink. Keep busy and avoid activities during which you customarily drink, like watching sports on TV. Try to minimize stress, especially stressful situations that typically trigger heavy drinking for you. (More about triggers later). And if you're tired, thirsty, hungry, or lonely, have some rest or sustenance, or get some positive human contact as soon as possible, to head off a drinking urge.

"Confrontation" involves recognizing that you've got a drinking urge, and focusing your attention on dealing with it. The urge often seems to be saying that it won't leave you alone until you give in. The fact is, the urge will go away if you just outwait it – so mentally settle down to outwait that urge. During the waiting, you can "urge surf." That is, urges typically rise and fall like waves, and you can make a game of seeing the urge rise, crest, and then inevitably subside.

Another confrontation technique is to substitute positive for negative messages. The urge might say, for instance, that tonight is a special occasion and you can just have a drink or two and then go back to your "30." Answer the urge back with the statement: "Each time I refuse an urge I get stronger and stronger in dealing with it." Lastly, you can bring to mind your long-term objective of getting your over-drinking under control, to enjoy a healthier and more satisfying life.

“Distraction” involves having a set of activities you can get into quickly that will draw your attention away from the urge. You might, for instance, telephone a friend, go for a drive, do some housework, or any other positive activity.

### Skills for Moderate Drinking

A great use for your time during your “30” is to study various techniques to help keep your drinking moderate when you do resume drinking. The list of helpful techniques is so long that you probably can’t keep them all in mind. So look for a few that seem to deal best with your particular drinking issues. Get them well in mind for the time later when you’ll start to drink again. As discussed later, you’ll also make up a list of your personal “rules” for managing drinking, and some of these techniques may go on your “rules” list.

Control skills for drinking situations include:

- *Measuring*, since drinking guidelines are in numbers of standard-sized drinks.
- *Counting*, to keep to your guidelines.
- *Eating* helps slow the uptake of alcohol, and is an alternative pleasure.
- *The first few minutes* seem to set our style for a given drinking occasion.
- *Control thirst* by having a non-alcoholic drink before or in a drinking occasion.
- *Delaying* your first drink a bit, and/or getting to the occasion a little late.
- *Diluting* alcohol by having lower alcohol-content drinks.
- *Sipping* small amounts slowly to keep the pace of intake down.
- *Put the glass down* to avoid the automatic drinking that goes with holding a glass.
- *Time* beforehand the start of any drinks you’ll have on a drinking occasion.
- *Self-Talk* during drinking about your limits, how well you are managing, etc.
- *Bring your own* non-alcoholic drinks to a party during an abs period.
- *Focus on the fun* of the occasion, not the drinking.
- *Think about tomorrow* anytime you’re tempted to have more than planned.
- *Heed the “stop” signal*, that feeling that you’ve “had enough.”

During your “30” you can rehearse the use of these control skills by thinking ahead to a typical drinking situation you might be in later. Then make up a list of the specific skills you will use in such a situation.

### Your Over-Drinking Triggers

An extremely useful next step is to figure out the situations that most often lead you to over-drinking. For almost everybody, there’s a definite pattern. A check-list includes timing (time of day, day of week, seasons, etc), places, activities, particular people, things directly or indirectly related to work, money issues, your physical state, relations with others (including spouse/significant other, parents, in-laws, and children), particular feeling states, and major life events. Think also about your pattern of drinking, whether your pattern is regular daily, or during certain kinds of events, or whatever. And see if your pattern is generally for fun, or generally to relieve stress or bad feelings.

After thinking all that through, you can probably spot the most important trigger or triggers for your over-drinking. So now you’ll know the particular type of situation that you need

to target with new behaviors. It's helpful at this point to make a written list of those key trigger situations. On the positive side, think about any other types of situations in which you usually tend to drink moderately. Thinking about those other situations can show you the behaviors and feelings you already have that go with moderate drinking.

### Managing Your Triggers

Now we come to a most important step, coming up with specific ways to manage each of your important trigger situations. You should note these management strategies right on your list of triggers.

For social situations in which heavy drinking is the order of the day, at bars or with certain people, you'd best simply avoid those. And maybe there are other types of social situations where others may not be drinking too heavily but you tend to get carried away. There your rule might be to use one or more of the stronger drinking-control techniques like alternating non-alcoholic beverages, or settling into the situation for a time before your first drink.

Drinking alone is a fairly common trigger situation, because there are no social constraints on your behavior. One good technique for dealing with the "alone" times is to fill those times with activities (we'll discuss the importance of non-drinking interests shortly), so as to distract yourself. It may be necessary to set yourself a rule to just not drink alone.

Habitual drinking at a certain time of day is another common trigger. To be a moderator, per the limits, you no longer can drink every day. Keeping a calendar marked with the 3-4 days a week you may drink, will at least show you that there are oases in the desert. On days when you don't want to drink, alternative activities are a great help. If the getting-home-from-work time is your trigger, it can help to get into some new habits, such as taking a hot shower then, or going for a walk, or going to the gym. And on days when you can drink at that certain time, really focus your thoughts on use of your chosen control techniques.

Negative feelings are more likely to lead to destructive levels of drinking than upbeat feelings. That's because we drink for mood improvement, but when we start with negative feelings the drinking may actually deepen the negatives, or not budge them much. In that case we may go on drinking just to numb our feelings, which can take a lot of booze. In general, it will be best to make it a rule not to drink when in the grip of negative emotions.

At least we have a better chance of identifying and dealing with negative emotions when our minds are clear. Recurrent depression and anxiety are feelings that may require and respond to professional treatment. For dealing with stress, there are a number of books and online resources that can give you coping strategies. For anger, the cause may be fear or frustration in not coping well. For all these, we have a better chance of identifying the problem and finding help from inner or external resources if our minds are unclouded by drinking.

If you're married and your spouse is upset about your drinking, he or she may not approve at all of your trying moderation rather than quitting. Just realize that you're in a not uncommon situation. If you can, describe the MM program to your spouse and see if you

can get a little slack while you're working on it, so that the spouse doesn't go ballistic every time there's a glass in your hand. Sharing your list of triggers and strategies for dealing with them may be helpful.

### Your Drinking Rules

Now that you've figured out your over-drinking triggers and how to manage them, it's time to set down a list that will be a big part of your life going forward. That's a list of your very own drinking rules. The list should be short, concise, and realistic. Including your key trigger situations is good. A limit on drinks per occasion on days when you do drink is good. Listing the couple of the control techniques on which you'll focus on drinking occasions is good.

Overall, it's what seems most important and workable to you at this point, when you're looking forward to starting drinking again after your "30." The list can be an evolving thing, modified as you find new issues coming to the fore in the future and news ways of dealing effectively with them. To help make it part of you, look it over periodically. You might even carry a folded copy with you as you start to moderate.

### Non-Drinking Activities

Chances are, drinking has taken up a fair amount of your time recently. Stopping drinking for the "30," and moderate drinking on a limited number of days leaves a vacuum that needs to be filled. The great thing is, you can probably find some new or resumed activities that will give you more lasting and genuine satisfaction than all that drinking.

There may not be a lot of appealing non-drinking activities that come to mind right away. So spend a little time thinking about activities you've enjoyed at some point in the past, or ones you've simply been curious about. Let your imagination roam a bit.

Non-drinking activities that involve being with other people are particularly helpful.. Says Stanton Peele, author of *Seven Tools to Beat Addiction*: "Make sure that people you hang out with are people who look and act the way you would like to. Social imitation is the easiest form not only of flattery but of self-improvement."

Regular exercise works for a lot of people. It's good for you, and in many cases it makes you feel good. If you're quite out of shape, it may not feel good at all to start. So you may have to give it a little time, and try different types of exercise, to find something that works for you. If it doesn't make you feel good, the chances are you won't stay with it.

Things you can do at home are fine, but if a lot of your over-drinking has been at home, it's obviously good to find activities that get you out of the house. Many people find that activities involving service to others are especially rewarding.

### Starting to Moderate

The "30" is a workable time-span for many people to experience life without alcohol, learn skills for non-drinking, identify over-drinking triggers and means to cope with them, list

personal drinking rules, and start on new non-drinking activities. However, if it doesn't feel right to start drinking again on day 31, just keep abstinent until it does feel right.

To stay on the right track when resuming drinking, it pays to give a very high degree of attention to occasions when you drink. A tool for doing that is the diary at the end of this piece. Keeping it faithfully for at least a couple of months will give you a lot of support. It helps focus your attention on the subject. And you'll be surprised how pleased you will be to complete weeks with a clean record of moderation. Oddly enough, the thought of having to record a mistake in your diary may even keep you from taking that extra drink or other miss-step on some occasion.

Now, slips are not uncommon during this early period of practicing moderate drinking. Old habits die hard, and the new more positive habits can take some time to get well established. When you slip back into an old pattern, avoid recrimination, advises Alan Marlatt, director of the Addictive Behavior Research Center at the University of Washington. "Don't say, 'I can't do it.' People make mistakes. If you keep working at it, you'll get better over time. That's what the research shows."

The thing is to stop and figure out what went wrong and plan corrective action. If the slip happened because you broke one of your rules, maybe you need to be more alert to that particular kind of situation. If the slip uncovers some type of trigger you hadn't identified before, maybe you need a new rule to deal with that trigger.

So in the early stages of practicing moderation, accentuate the positives to yourself about the progress you're making. Don't get discouraged by a few setbacks. Giving yourself rewards for good work on moderation can be helpful, including modest things like a DVD, or a book, or eating out, or whatever.

### Taking Stock for the Long Term

If you get into serious trouble with moderation, like extended over-drinking spells or breaking your rules more than you're keeping them, that's a sign to stop and take a fundamental look at what's going on. It may help to start a new abstinence period. During this abs period you can re-work the steps, looking especially at your triggers and rules. If you don't see a way to get back on the track to moderation, maybe you need to see a therapist who deals with addiction problems for more support.

In the long term, many in MM find it useful to do an annual repeat "30," or at least an abs period of more than a couple of days. Just getting alcohol completely out of your life for awhile can reinforce your self-control. And it can be a very satisfying time of moving through the changes in circumstances and mood that life brings, completely free of the effects of drinking.

If you continue to experience serious problems in trying to moderate, it's likely that moderation just isn't for you at this time. Altogether, around 1/3 of the people who get significantly involved with MM eventually find that abstinence is their best resolution. Most of those people find that MM has been helpful in giving them a firm indication of the right resolution for their drinking problem.

## MM Resources for Support

### Background on MM

On the *moderation.org* home page, under the “About MM” heading there is material on the background and philosophy of MM, supportive “Research,” and a large collection of member comments on a variety of topics under the “FAQ” heading.

### Group Support

Many find contact and discussion with others working on the same kind of problems extremely helpful. MM is strong in its offering of such support, especially online. Look under “Online Support” on the *moderation.org* home page for a variety of ongoing discussion groups. Under “Live Meetings” on the home page is a listing a face-to-face meetings in a few areas.

### Individual Therapist Support

For a list of moderation-friendly therapists, go to “Find a Moderation-Friendly Therapist” under “Tools” on the home page.

### Interactive Programs

The “Drinker’s Checkup” on the home page helps newcomers to self-evaluate.

The “Moderate Drinking” link takes you to an outstanding website, *ModerateDrinking.com*, that you can subscribe to, that provides extensive guidance through the MM program. It gives interactive feedback and support at each step, plus some added features like a mood tracker. Use of this website is an outstanding way to help you keep focused on working through the steps of change, due to its many interactive features.

### Further Written Steps of Change Material

For further reading, on the *moderation.org* home page check the “Suggested Reading List” under “Tools.”

The “*Responsible Drinking*” book by Rotgers et al lays out the MM program at length.

“*Controlling Your Drinking*” by Miller & Munoz is particularly strong on discussing alternative activities to drinking.

“*Rethinking Drinking*” by the US government’s National Institute for Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism is a moderation guide similar to this , downloadable free at [www.niaaa.nih.gov](http://www.niaaa.nih.gov).

### Support for Abstinence

- Alcoholics Anonymous. Has the longest track record and the largest number of local face-to-face meetings. Just look in the phone book.
- Secular Organization for Sobriety. Not religion-based, as is AA. [www.secularsobriety.org](http://www.secularsobriety.org).
- SMART Recovery. Based on modern psychology; deals with a variety of addictions; groups led by trained individuals. [www.smartrecovery.org](http://www.smartrecovery.org)
- Women for Sobriety. For the special needs of women, emphasizing individual competence and responsibility. [www.womenforsobriety.org](http://www.womenforsobriety.org)