



# EMPOWERED

Colorado LGBTQ+ Mental Health and Substance Use Disorder Initiative

Yvanite Koppens

## Dry January for a Healthier New Year

Dry January is a public health campaign that was started in 2012 by the U.K. based charity **Alcohol Change U.K.** Now a New Year's challenge that millions take part in around the globe, it's meant to give those who participate a chance to reset their relationship with alcohol. There are many different reasons people choose to be sober for 31 days. For some, Dry January is a way to cut back on their drinking after the holidays. Others do it just to see if they can. The challenge is also used by those who suspect that they might have a problem with alcohol.



Regardless of the reason people participate, many who do have reported many benefits to giving up drinking alcohol. According to the Alcohol Change U.K. website, 86% of participants saved money, 70% had better sleep, 66% had more energy, and 65% reported generally improved health. In a **survey of 800 people** who participated in Dry January completed in 2018, the average number of drinks consumed per

day had decreased and stayed down seven months after the challenge. One of the less tangible but no less important benefits of Dry January is the opportunity to **assess your relationship with alcohol.**

According to Steven Haden, CEO of Envision:You and licensed psychiatric rehabilitation counselor with the Mental Health Center of Denver, "Generally, for the average person, admitting you have a problem is very difficult. Even though I think we have made significant strides in how the general population views substance use disorders, we still have a long way to go."

This is particularly true for those who are a part of the LGBTQ+ community, where alcohol has often become a normalized way to socialize. In a survey of LGBTQ+ Coloradans conducted by OMNI institute in partnership with Envision:You, 25% of lesbian, bisexual, and gay respondents reported binge drinking compared to 16% of heterosexual respondents. This is a trend that is unfortunately observed across the board when →

## 5 HEALTHY TIPS

... for setting goals as we approach the new year

- 1 Reflect** on your short-term and long-term priorities.
- 2 Establish SMART goals** – Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, Time-bound.
- 3 Break down goals** into smaller actionable tasks.
- 4 Accountability** is key, try verbalizing your goals to another person and writing them down.
- 5 One day at a time.** Setting goals during a global pandemic can feel pointless. Forgive yourself if circumstances outside of your control derail your goals. Always prioritize your health over your productivity.

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## FRESH PRESS

In *The Importance, Benefits, and Value of Goal Setting*, Leslie Riopel, a professor of Psychology at Northwood University, breaks down past and present research on goal setting and the impact it can have on everything from professional success to mental health. Even the existence of a goal can increase the amount of mental energy and time we spend on that area of our life – goals help motivate action and build resiliency in the face of potential barriers. Setting goals has been shown to help improve the outcome in treatment for mental health, and is used in several current types of psychotherapy as a major tool. It's important to set realistic goals and continue to evaluate their effectiveness as time goes on. Research supports that potentially an even better predictor of whether a goal will be accomplished is if it is 1) written down and 2) communicated to someone else.

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**DRY JANUARY *continued***

it comes to substance use and the queer community. They often self-medicate to deal with discrimination based on sexual or gender orientation, rejection from friends and family who don't accept their identity, and other minority stresses.

This year with the COVID-19 pandemic the drinking landscape looks a little different. **Retail alcohol sales have trended upward since March** as many people have turned to alcohol to cope with stress. It is important to note that, **according to the director** of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, alcohol misuse can lead to impaired



immune system function as well as increased susceptibility to respiratory illness.

With this in mind, it might be a good time to evaluate your drinking habits. If you decide to participate in Dry January, identify healthier coping mechanisms beforehand that you can use as an alternative to drinking. You can also use the official app from Alcohol Change U.K. **Try Dry**, a great tool all year for those who are considering sobriety. Even if you aren't participating, make sure to support those around you who do!

**ADVOCATE  
DARCEY CUNNINGHAM**

Darcey Cunningham (she/her) is a Licensed Professional Counselor (LPC) and a certified eye movement desensitization and reprocessing therapist at the Mental Health Center of Denver. Darcey is passionate about providing attachment-focused, trauma-informed, and affirming care for the LGBTQ+ population. In her role as the clinical program manager at Envision:You, she helps develop and deliver training for other behavioral health care providers to create culturally affirming practices.



**PROGRAM HIGHLIGHT:  
HOW TO HAVE THE TALK**

We know that substance use and mental health issues do not get better when they are ignored – in fact, they are likely to get much worse. Stigma surrounding the receipt of mental health services is among the many barriers that discourage people from seeking help, especially among members of the LGBTQ+ community. The How to Have the Talk program is a public awareness and social media campaign that aims to foster healthy conversations about behavioral health in the LGBTQ+ community. The campaign provides education and resources to help individuals feel more comfortable giving support and reaching out.

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**COMMUNITY PARTNER**

**The Mental Health Center of Denver** has been an invaluable partner to Envision:You from its inception. The organization is a primary partner in the Colorado Behavioral Health & Wellness Summit, and also received Envision:You's corporate

**Lean on Me** award this year. Most importantly, the Mental Health Center of Denver demonstrates a devotion to increasing access to culturally relevant and identity affirming mental health services and programs, including those available to the LGBTQ+ community.

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