The Problem Drinking Continuum is a simple way of depicting something that seems pretty complicated: the spectrum of behaviors and potential problems linked to various degrees of drinking. The Problem Drinking Continuum, as developed by Do It Now Foundation, is a linear progression of symptoms, and readers can use it to link the continuum and its purpose. Use of a blackboard or a large sheet of paper, rather than the continuum charts, might be helpful. It's only intended as an itinerary of some of the places that drinkers visit—and a road map back to a drug-free life. The Problem Drinking Continuum isn't intended to imply that an inexorable downhill slide accompanies all drinking. The Continuum isn't intended to portray any one rapidly progressive, irreversible accumulation of symptoms. Nor does it imply that any point on the continuum is an either-or stage of the disease of alcoholism. It's just one point on a continuum of behaviors, from abstinence to alcoholism, on problem drinking.

For Professionals

Are there any other recommended applications for the Continuum?

You may want to apply principles from the Continuum to real-world situations which promote careless use of alcohol and opportunities for problem drinking. Examples: Extended “happy hours” at bars and restaurants, drinking contests as initiations into clubs or fraternities; getting drunk on New Year’s Eve. These are all socially-acceptable invitations to overdrink. Broader potential applications aside, though, our main focus remains on the individual. That’s why we created the Continuum: as a tool for counselors, educators, and other helping professionals to show how drinking problems unfold, to help clients recognize and eliminate destructive patterns in their lives.

For other readers, though, the most important application is the one nearest at hand. If you include yourself in this group, we invite you to take what you need from the Continuum to transform your relationship with alcohol—once and for all, and one day at a time.
The Problem Drinking Continuum
Patterns of Use and Abuse

The Problem Drinking Continuum is best used as a tool to evaluate drinking problems and break down the denial of problem drinkers. The continuum lists various drinking behaviors, from abstinence to alcoholism, and reads from left to right, linking increased levels of consumption with life problems. Still, it's not meant to be read as a progressive, irreversible accumulation of symptoms. Nor does it imply that any point on the continuum is an early, middle, or late stage of the disease of alcoholism.

Questions & Answers

What's the best way to use the Continuum?

The Problem Drinking Continuum is best used as a tool to evaluate drinking problems and break down the denial of problem drinkers. The continuum lists various drinking behaviors, from abstinence to alcoholism, and reads from left to right, linking increased levels of consumption with life problems. Still, it's not meant to be read as a progressive, irreversible accumulation of symptoms. Nor does it imply that any point on the continuum is an early, middle, or late stage of the disease of alcoholism.

The counselor will likely emphasize behaviors or incidents that are most relevant to the client, such as arrests, a family crisis, blackouts, mounting debt, or other pressing problems.

As the client and counselor focus on these issues, it becomes increasingly difficult for the client to maintain that his or her drinking is merely “social.” And, often for the first time, the client is able to admit that drinking is causing serious life problems. In future sessions, the therapist and client can refine this awareness and define individual problems more precisely.

Still, we repeat: the Continuum is not meant to be viewed as a chart of progressive symptoms of the disease of alcoholism. Nor does it imply that any point on the continuum is an early, middle, or late stage of the disease of alcoholism.

Why do you keep emphasizing that particular point?

The prevailing concept of alcoholism as a chronic, progressive disease has been invaluable in removing the stigma of alcoholism and in helping tens of thousands get the treatment they need.

However, it's also fostered the popular misconception that if a person has a drinking problem, he or she is probably progressing into alcoholism, or, conversely, that drinking is basically harmless for people who aren't alcoholics.

Increasing evidence shows that the progressive disease model of alcoholism simply does not apply to all problem drinkers.
You don't have to be an alcoholic to have a drinking problem. (And you don't have to create more problems for yourself before you do something about it.)