

# First Responders and Alcohol: Use or Abuse?

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One issue I frequently run into, as a counselor, is someone who suspects alcohol use is a problem but is unsure of what they should do about it. They may even question if they want to do anything about an activity in which they find personal value. The concerns about alcohol use often originate with the suggestion of a significant other or when health or performance difficulties are experienced by the individual.

First Responders (Police, Fire, Paramedics) are not immune to these concerns and alcohol abuse among them, estimated as high as 25% overall, is a well-documented subject. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to understand the perceived benefit of alcohol use by First Responders as both a coping mechanism to deal with the stress of the job and as a social lubricant with peers – the only ones thought of who can relate to that stress. Most indications that alcohol might be a problem fall into the categories of difficulties with performance issues at work and relationship problems at home.

It also doesn't take a rocket scientist to recognize the roadblocks for Police, Firefighter and Paramedic professionals seeking help with a drinking problem. The idea of a person who is expected to be the example of control and wise behavior can be seen as a contradiction to the person with an alcohol problem. Twelve step programs focus on admitting to being powerless. Mistrust of those without insight into the particular issues of First Responders keep many away from seeking help as does the worry about confidentiality.

So, what are you supposed to do? If you or someone else sees your alcohol use as a problem, the following might be resources that you can explore:

- Employee Assistance Program (EAP) services
- Peer support services
- Individual counseling
- Chaplaincy services

An important aspect of accessing resources is to investigate the provider's skill and experience in working with the specific culture and needs of the Police, Firefighter and Paramedic communities.