# Alcohol and mental health a toxic cocktail

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| **Date** | 2019-06-11 14:57:11 |
| **Categories** | Health  |

### Head in the sand: Where Cheers Mate gets it wrong

An initiative of the Foundation for Alcohol Research and Education (FARE), Drink Tank was established to generate meaningful commentary and debate about alcohol policy, and to provide a platform for all members of the Australian community to share their views and concerns.

It was never intended to be a mouthpiece for the alcohol industry; players large or small. A billion dollar industry in Australia alone, with the marketing and advertising clout to match, the alcohol industry needs no further assistance in heavily marketing, promoting and normalising alcohol consumption.

Today on Drink Tank we share excerpts of our correspondence with Cheers Mate founder Ben Osborne, and address his comments and replies on our recent publication in [The RiotACT](https://the-riotact.com/ethical-vodka-you-must-be-taking-the-piss/305748).

We stand by our comments published last week in the post, [*Ethical Vodka? You must be taking the piss!*](https://drinktank.org.au/2019/05/ethical-vodka-you-must-be-taking-the-piss/)

Marketing alcohol as an opportunity to address mental health issues which are themselves caused by alcohol is as nonsensical as it is wrong.

It is wrong when one of Australia’s greatest cultural icons, Olivia Newton-John, does it.

It’s wrong whether it be an overseas alcohol giant; the likes of Heineken, or an Australian-owned winery.

Nor does it matter that in this case it’s a young local entrepreneur, no matter the sincerity of his intentions.

Whenever Drink Tank sees it, we will continue to call out the incongruous marketing of harmful products that claims to care about mental health, or cancer, while at the same time profiting from a product that causes the very harm they supposedly care about and seek to help remedy.

Cheers Mate founder Ben Osborne promotes at length that all profits from his ‘ethical vodka’ are funneled back into mental health support for hospitality workers. While at face value these intentions may be genuine, what Ben refuses to accept is that no matter which way you cut it, this is ‘profiting’ from a product that is harming vulnerable people, many of whom Cheers Mate claims to be helping.

Here are what just a few of Australia’s leading organisations on mental health have to say about alcohol:

*There is growing evidence that alcohol increases the risk of highly prevalent mental health conditions such as depression (major depression is twice the usual rate in people who have an alcohol use disorder) and anxiety in some people.*

– [Australian Government Department of Veterans’ Affairs](https://www.therightmix.gov.au/assets/factsheets/DVA0007_6_Alcohol_Mental_Health_v4.pdfhttps%3A/www.therightmix.gov.au/assets/factsheets/DVA0007_6_Alcohol_Mental_Health_v4.pdf)

*[Drugs and alcohol] are addictive substances that can cause symptoms of depression and/or anxiety or make an existing problem worse, while making recovery much harder. Some people with depression and/or anxiety can also develop problems with drugs and alcohol, which may also need treatment*.

*–* [Beyond Blue](https://www.beyondblue.org.au/the-facts/drugs-alcohol-and-mental-health%27)

*Alcohol also reduces inhibitions and impacts decision making, which can lead to us making decisions whilst drinking that we would not normally make sober. These can be positive or negative. It is also linked with …self-harm and suicide in people who may already be going through a tough time.*

*–* [HeadSpace](https://headspace.org.au/young-people/how-does-alcohol-affect-mental-health/)

*People with a mental illness experience drug problems at far higher rates than the general community. Studies suggest that around 50% [of those with a mental illness] also have a drug or alcohol problem.­*

– [Sane.org](https://www.sane.org/information-stories/facts-and-guides/drugs-and-mental-illness)

*The Australian Bureau of Statistics’ most recent*[*Causes of Death*](https://ontheline.org.au/blog/australian-bureau-of-statistics-report-suicide-increase/)*data made headlines last year after it reported that the suicide rate had increased. Amongst its findings were alarming statistics which pointed to significant underlying issues… Not only were men three times more likely to die from suicide — the rate of deaths in which alcohol was a factor was at its highest since 1998.*

– [Mensline Australia](https://mensline.org.au/wellbeing-blog/alcohol-and-mental-health/)

We could go on.

Ben himself has referred to the high level of mental health issues and alcohol abuse experienced by those in the hospitality industry. In fact, it’s the premise of his project.

And this is true.

However, as someone who worked in hospitality for years, whose husband was in the industry for over a decade and lost friends to suicide along the way – many of whose mental health symptoms were worsened through alcohol and substance abuse – Cheers Mate’s blatant denial and patronising disregard for reality is astounding.

Many of us at FARE have very real and personal experience with loved ones affected by alcoholism and mental health, myself included.

The assumption that we are “outside” of this problem shows just how shallow the depth of understanding of mental health and substance abuse is, here, no matter how noble the intention.

And that’s plain dangerous.

As one RiotACT [commenter](https://the-riotact.com/ethical-vodka-you-must-be-taking-the-piss/305748), Lucy, put it, a more meaningful approach would be to promote lower-strength or alcohol-free drinks, and encourage *not* drinking to be more widely accepted, than to promote what is ultimately a highly alcoholic and damaging product.

Alcohol dependent people and people with mental health issues will often find excuses to drink. As Lucy points out, “what better excuse to down a bottle of spirits than [to say], ‘I’m helping people’?”

Good intentions aside, at the end of the day, Cheers Mate is responsible for further fueling the problem, not fixing it.

**If you or anyone you know needs help:**

* [Lifeline](https://www.lifeline.org.au/)on 13 11 14
* [Kids Helpline](https://www.kidshelp.com.au/) on 1800 551 800
* [MensLine Australia](https://www.mensline.org.au/Home.html) on 1300 789 978
* [Suicide Call Back Service](https://www.suicidecallbackservice.org.au/) on 1300 659 467
* [Beyond Blue](https://www.beyondblue.org.au/) on 1300 22 46 36
* [Headspace](https://headspace.org.au/) on 1800 650 890

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