

# 'Mindless drinking felt pointless at best, destructive at worst'

The sober-curious movement has gone from niche to mainstream, largely fuelled by twenty and thirty-somethings. Here, one woman reveals why being sober-ish has become another kind of self-care



Toni Jones, 42, journalist and founder of self-help platform Shelf Help (@shelfhelp.club)

'So, are you *sober-sober*?' I was asked recently by a famous face, mostly famous for her struggles with alcohol. 'Sober-ish' I replied, meekly, feeling strangely 'less than' as she internally dismissed me as 'not an alcoholic'. The truth is, you don't have to have a 'drinking problem' to have a problem with drinking.

I grew up as part of a large, blended family with a drunk, disinterested dad who was in and (mostly) out of my life until my twenties, when we finally, quietly, gave up on each other. By the time he drank himself to death when I was in my early thirties, we hadn't spoken in years, and all he left me was a bucket of limiting beliefs and the clichéd but no less real self-esteem issues that come from not feeling valued by a parent as a kid.

I started drinking aged 14, falling in love with this magical substance that helped me forget the tough stuff while making me feel like I fitted in. Two decades later, I was still drinking for the same reasons, and I'd become pretty good at it. As a hard-working, hard-playing journalist, alcohol was a big part of my life. Heavy sessions – often on an empty stomach, four times a week – were par for the course, and 'hangxiety' was my default state.

Any self-help expert will tell you that habits exist because they do, or did at one point, serve you in some way. And alcohol was an ally in my self-sabotaging quest to reinforce my oldest, most ingrained beliefs: that I was not important or interesting or 'enough' without it. To go without would mean having to listen to the noise; the voice in my head that was gently suggesting this was not the way I wanted, or deserved, to be living my life.

In my quest for 'balance', I battled through FOMO and boredom to complete several dry Januaries and sober Octobers. But these 'detoxes' were swiftly followed with 'retoxes' that rendered any benefits for my physical health redundant. As for my mental health, feeling like I'd failed gave me another reason to dislike myself, and another reason to go the pub.

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There was no real waking-up-in-a-gutter moment for me. It was more a creeping realisation that being sober – like running and eating vegetables – made me feel my most mentally well. This time last year, I embarked on yet another sober October. And what began as an intention to sip on lime and soda for 30 days stretched into a 100-day alcohol-free challenge.

Being sober didn't feel like a choice or a label. I just began to realise that drinking alcohol – something that made me feel physically and mentally unwell – was incongruous with the self-care I was going to great lengths to prioritise. The idea of carving out time to do the things that experience has taught me to cherish – reading, running, yoga, meditation – then mindlessly sinking a few drinks felt pointless at best, destructive at worst. Drinking was a part of my life, but it was *only* a part of my life. And when I realised I could lift it out, leaving the other parts intact, it was like an epiphany.

Good friends were supportive, curious even – though I intentionally avoided certain people and places, which told me a lot about why I'd sought them out in the first place. Being sober changed the energy in my friendships; without me to lead the after-party charge, they became much less frequent. But unlike previous sober ventures, when I'd moped around at home feeling sorry for myself, I made a conscious effort to socialise. I still wanted to enjoy life, just in a different way.

I describe myself as sober-ish. Much like calling yourself plant-based over vegan, it isn't a line in the sand. And it means on the occasions that I do drink – once or twice a month – it's because I've chosen to. More than mindful, I'm intentional with my drinking. Before making the decision, I decide how I want to feel. At a big celebration or a special night with a friend, I might drink to feel silly and a bit loose, and I'll only drink things that make me feel great, like champagne. I won't drink because I'm bored, lonely or stressed, because there's a free bar, or to make someone else feel more comfortable.

Not drinking doesn't define me, it's just another part of my 'best me' toolkit. I used to be proud of the amounts of booze I could put away. Now I'm proud to be a cheap date, because it tells me that I'm looking after my body and myself. **WB**

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You might feel compelled to drink due to external pressures – the assumption that drinking is inevitable because you're at a bar, a work do or a wedding, or pressure from those around you ('don't be a bore'; 'just come for one'). While alcohol can make you feel more comfortable in social settings, it can also exacerbate anxiety and low mood. Alcohol is a depressant; it can affect your sleep and have implications on your performance at work the next day, beyond the clichéd hangover. The decision to stop drinking can be riddled with complexity. You might feel 'judged' and find that alcohol was substituting a meaningful connection in certain friendships, even a romantic relationship. Your social circle might shrink as a result, and that can be hard to come to terms with.

**Dr Sarah Vohra, consultant psychiatrist and author @themindmedic**

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