

Is It Time^{TO} Evaluate YOUR Relationship WITH Alcohol?

by a CHADD Volunteer Leader



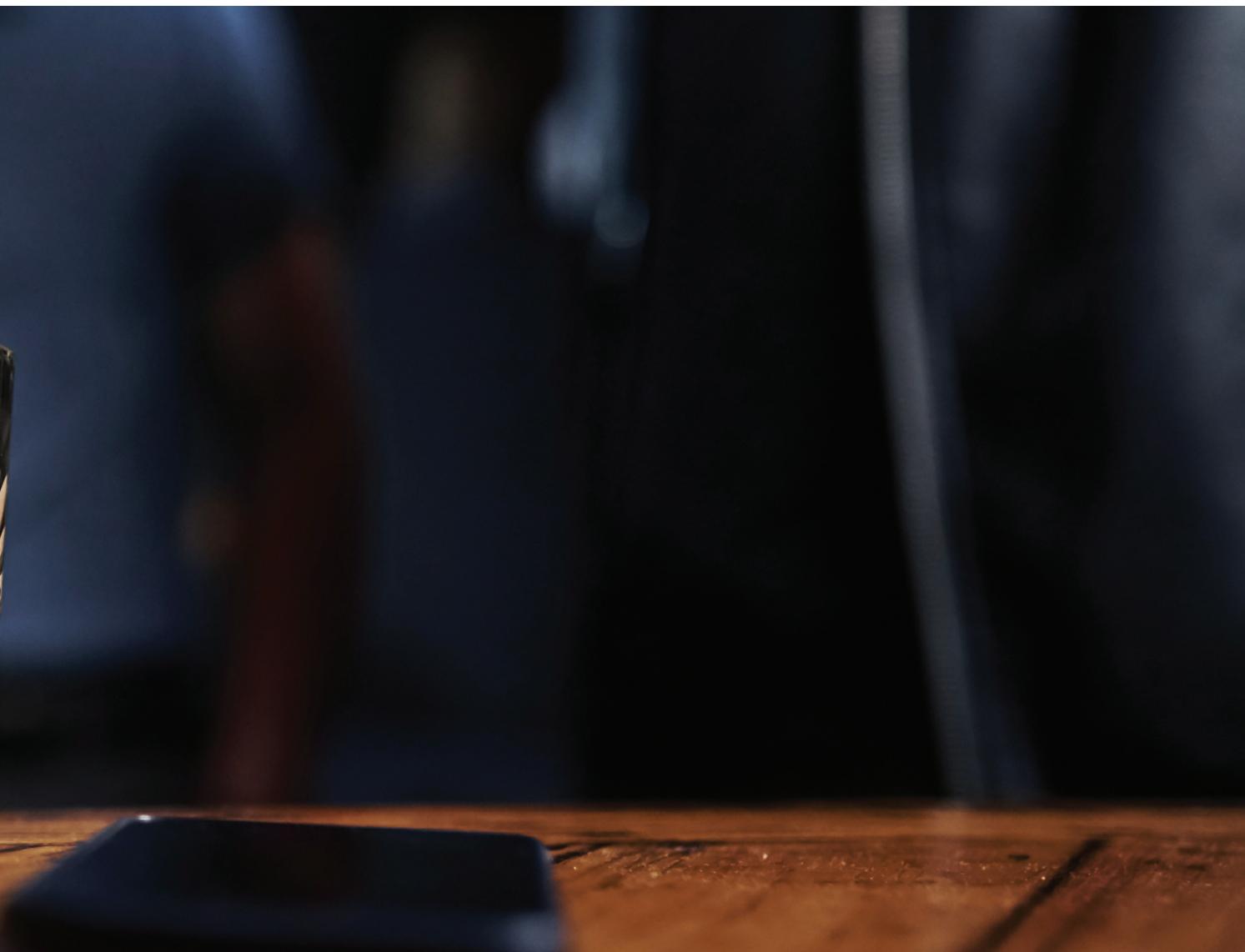
IN 2019, I inadvertently joined a movement I didn't even know existed. Within hours of researching information on reducing my alcohol consumption, I was introduced to new phrases like *sober curious*, *Dry January*, *sober sprint*, plus *Quit Lit* (publications devoted to decreasing alcohol intake). I discovered resources like This Naked Mind, Club Soda, and Alcohol Lied to Me, in addition to apps to moderate or stop drinking altogether. Some apps even calculate cost and calorie savings based on your previous habits.

So, how did I get here? Slowly, incrementally, and, truthfully, somewhat through no fault of my own.

Over time, I had noticed that my number of drinks per week was increasing. While I was never sloppy drunk or operated a vehicle while impaired, my drinking was having an effect on my life. I rarely slept through the night, developed GERD, awoke unrested and dehydrated, and had concerns about the health of

my liver. I started to enjoy my winding down with three drinks at the end of the day almost as much as hanging with my friends, or going to the gym. I take an ADHD medication and ignored the label's alcohol warning. I ate fatty foods with my wine to slow down the absorption and again the next day to help with the aftereffects. I was lethargic most days, and that increased my already-problematic tendency to procrastinate.

Don't get the wrong idea here. I didn't have a morning drink, I could skip a few days, and I never blacked out. But while drinking a glass of wine at a reception or by a crackling fire is glamorous, drinking three glasses while vacuuming is not. I also noticed that my quest for wine and beer was becoming time-consuming. Not just cocktail hour, but I was counting down the hours until it was respectable to imbibe. My social life and my humor started revolving around alcohol. My wineglass was getting bigger, but my bank account was getting smaller.



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It wasn't all bad (which is part of the problem). My lack of inhibitions fueled a carefree attitude and I love making others laugh. I like this side of me. My occasional blunders were minor. I once organized a book club with a group of strangers I met at a neighbor's party. I hope they realized it was just talk, because I don't have time for one more thing.

Our boozy culture

In actuality, my journey is not surprising. As a society, more and more events have built-in alcohol components. Churches and museums have activities "on tap." 5K races, ironically devoted to health, offer beer at the finish line. Festivals have beer gardens and cities and main streets have pop-up bars. Movie theaters that used to feature popcorn and soda now offer adult beverages.

There are reports that liquor advertisers realized that women were an uncultivated market. We now flock to wine-and-paint evenings, and book clubs can become as much about the wine as the featured book. Not to mention the memes devoted to mommy wine culture, teacher wine culture, and nurse wine culture.

On social media, instead of showing actual accomplishments, it is common to post photos with a glass or a bottle of booze. For a bad day, there are memes and posts about deserving a drink. There is now pushback like #Don'tPinkMyDrink to make female consumers aware that they are being targeted to increase profits.

Men have a separate set of challenges as drinking beer or liquor is considered a manly activity and can be the norm rather than the exception. Many activities that are geared towards men have alcohol consumption built in. It is hard to overcome this conditioning, which has occurred for generations.

Non-binary folks aren't left out of the equation either. While their societal acceptance is a positive occurrence for the LGBTQ community, events geared to this population are as booze-soaked as those for traditional genders.

So it is no wonder that many of us are feeling a bit in over our heads. Luckily, the alcohol reduction movement has arrived and it is much more user-friendly than you may envision. It started in Great Britain with the government initiative Dry January, and is spreading rapidly. Participants don't need to label themselves as alcoholic unless they want to. The common denominator is the desire to cut back or cut out using alcohol. You don't have to wait till January to begin.

Considering a break?

If you are considering joining the initiative, here is what I've learned.

- **Many people start with the first step of not drinking for 30 days.** This gives you insight into your attitude to-



ward drinking. Some people use the 30 days as a way of easily hitting the reset button. Others find it more of a struggle than they had envisioned. Some stumble and then get back on track, while others realize that they cannot moderate and heed the wakeup call. Statistically, those that participate in Dry January were drinking less in August.

Most people struggle with choosing a start date, because they have upcoming occasions where they would like to drink. In reality, there will always be a drinking occasion on the horizon and you could spend forever waiting for a convenient time. While there are no rules for this journey, pausing your sobriety for one night and then tacking an extra day at the end might not be in your best interest, although that is up to you.

- **Physical changes during the 30 days vary widely.** I had the illusion that I would sleep like a baby; I didn't. Some days I felt hung over despite being alcohol free. Apparently, it takes a while for the body to adjust. Most people noticed a difference in their appearance around the 20-day mark—improved skin texture, brighter eyes, healthier hair. Some lost weight and some had flatter tummies.

- **Not everyone will be supportive if you take a break from drinking.** Decide in advance whether to announce your plans to take a break. Give yourself permission to tell a white lie if you feel others might question or undermine your resolve, no matter how good-naturedly. The most common cover stories include: "I'm taking a new prescription" "I'm doing a 30-day cleanse" and "My recent blood work was wonky." Interestingly, while no one would discourage an overweight person from sticking to a new diet, or tell a friend with high blood pressure that they are no fun because they are avoiding salt, others often share their opinion when you decline a drink. It is puzzling, especially if you take



the stance that you aren't telling others they need to quit drinking, you are taking this step for yourself.

Another set of challenges occur if you are the only one in your household who is changing their habits or if your career requires your attendance at booze-centered activities, officially or unofficially, such as happy hours, golf outings, charity dinners, or gallery openings. This is where peer support that I will describe below comes in.

Where to get support

One key to successfully managing any attempt to modify drinking habits is, not surprisingly, peer support. Much like CHADD helps you navigate the many aspects of ADHD, the resources for reducing alcohol consumption were my lifeline. Here are just a few.

Organizations that rely on face-to-face meetings:

- **Alcoholics Anonymous** is the best known resource if you are bothered by your drinking habits. Meetings are located in most communities and have "open meetings" that nonalcoholics can attend. People either love it or hate it. My advice is to keep an open mind, ignore naysayers, and attend an open meeting to see if this is right for you.
- **SMART Recovery** is a science-based approach emphasizes self-empowerment and self-reliance, using methods of cognitive behavior therapy. They have a strong online presence as well as face-to-face meetings.
- **Refuge Recovery** is a nonprofit organization grounded in the belief that Buddhist principles and practices create a strong foundation for the addiction recovery process. Participants attend meetings and are guided by the organization's literature.

For a DIY approach, Quit Lit has helped many participants. In addition to books, most authors have blogs as well as a presence on social media and YouTube, so you can gain wisdom before purchasing their books or programs. Here is a partial list of popular self-help resources:

- **Dry January.** The granddaddy of the movement, Alcohol Change UK designed this annual challenge to improve the health of British citizens via a 30-day challenge. Information and a reward system make it user-friendly and fun.
- **Club Soda.** A mindful drinking program, Club Soda helps participants determine if moderation is for them. It consists of an online course, videos and social media. Their secret Facebook group participants their experience with honesty and determination.
- **This Naked Mind.** A book and program by author Annie Grace, who shares insights into using the subconscious to remove the desire to drink. The program has

expanded to include trained coaches. Her videos are popular and easy to understand.

- **The Unexpected Joy of Being Sober.** This book, by Catherine Grey, is especially popular with those under 40. The author chronicles her journey from drinking as a teen to living alcohol-free in a booze-filled world, sober dating, and reducing stigma for those seeking a sober lifestyle.

Another key to success is **substitution**—for activities as well as your former beverage.

- My biggest alcohol avoidance success was when I was slightly exhausted; aka, too tired to drink. I accomplished this by signing up for workouts that are slightly above my skill level, attending lectures and workshops that require mental effort, and requesting additional work hours. Working late, or having to show up early, are my friends when it comes to alcohol avoidance. For me, cleaning out closets and painting spare bedrooms didn't have the same effect. Bummer.
- Substitution of beverage helps replace old habits with new healthier ones. Kombucha, a fermented beverage nonetheless considered nonalcoholic, is a popular option for many abstainers. Major beer brands, including Heineken, have a nonalcoholic version. Substituting a "lookalike" beverage works for some, but triggers cravings in others. A line of craft mocktails, Curious Elixirs, is devoted to keeping your taste buds and your liver happy at the same time. One caveat—drinks without alcohol are priced the same as their boozy counterparts.
- Bars and restaurants are becoming savvier about those who don't imbibe. Great Britain just opened up a bar that only serves mocktails and alcohol-free beer and wine. You are no longer stuck with club soda or a Shirley Temple unless that is what you want.

IF YOU ARE CONSIDERING reducing or eliminating alcohol, there has never been a better time than now. As for my journey, it actually followed a predictable pattern. I accomplished 27 of my 30 days. (I went out for ladies' night on day 27. Bad move.) Toward the end I completely lost my taste for wine, but once I went back to it I was back at my old levels within two weeks. I was surprised that I couldn't moderate as well as I had envisioned.

I'm now working on a moderation program and consume fewer beverages per week, but not my old amounts on the days that I drink. I plan to pause my drinking and aim for 100 days—or quit completely. But there is a wedding coming up in a few weeks, yada, yada, yada. I'm confident that my changed attitude, and doubling down on supports mentioned above, will help me reach my goal once I get underway. ☺