

HEALTH

Are you a stress drinker? The signs — and how to break the habit

Anna Maxted asks the experts how to unwind without reaching for another glass of wine



“Even though alcohol may give you that quick fix, it’s the worst tool for the job”

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[Anna Maxted](#)

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Charlotte, the director of her family business, was 48 when her drinking was at its worst. She could get through a bottle of wine a night, often almost two on Fridays with her husband when the children were in

bed. "I relied on that drink at the end of the busy day," she says. "My attitude was: 'I deserve a wine.'"

The first glass, often poured as she cooked dinner, acted like a sedative. "Time to chill. And then the third, fourth or fifth was about blotting it all out, stopping overthinking everything." It didn't strike her as out of the ordinary. "It was the socially acceptable way of dealing with a demanding job and a busy family life." Eventually, she realised the "stressed? Have a drink" cycle was only leaving her more tired and overwhelmed.

In January Charlotte, now 55, sought help from Sandra Parker, a London-based alcohol-abuse coach who runs Just the Tonic Coaching. Five years ago Parker quit her lucrative City career and post-5pm binge-drinking habit to help other women to address the same problem.



Keep the ritual of drinking but change the ingredients

SHUTTERSTOCK

The way Charlotte drank is increasingly common, Parker says, especially among professional, educated women in midlife, juggling a demanding job, children and elderly parents. "Studies show, if you have a successful career, a certain level of education, you're even more likely to be a heavy drinker," she says. "It's associated with being able to switch on, a reward, and

a shortcut to stopping being stressed about the working day. It becomes an ingrained pattern of behaviour, quite quickly.”

Although men are still more likely to die from alcohol-related causes, British women have been closing the gender-drinking gap for decades. We are now some of the heaviest drinkers in the world, according to a global study of 28 million led by the University of Washington. Stress repeatedly emerges as one of our main drivers, according to recent research from Yale University.

Parker says the women who turn to her for help have gym memberships, do yoga, and spend time and money on looking after themselves. A recent study called *Fit and Tipsy?*, published in *Medicine & Science in Sports & Exercise*, found that women with high levels of cardiorespiratory fitness are between 1.5 to 2 times as likely to drink moderately or heavily as those who are sedentary. Charlotte considered herself to be healthy. “I’d go running on Saturday at 8am with my friends after drinking two bottles of wine on Friday.” Parker tried all the right things to manage stress. “I went to a meditation teacher, I was looking at my diet, I ran a lot” — everything except quit drinking.

The singer Adele, 35, revealed this week that she gave up drinking part-way through her Vegas residency, saying she realised she had previously been “literally borderline alcoholic”.

● [Women drive rise in alcohol deaths](#)

For some the perimenopause and menopause is an additional stress factor, says Dr Bella Smith, a GP and co-author of *The Female Body Bible*. “There’s a societal stress, and then in midlife we also go through a physiological stress. Your body and hormones are changing, your stress levels are rising, your cortisol levels are rising, and it becomes that perfect storm.”

She warns that stress drinking can be particularly bad for women. “Stress and stress hormones such as cortisol can affect how the body metabolises alcohol.” And this can become a vicious cycle because alcohol acts as more of a depressant than an antidepressant, affecting sleep quality and increasing anxiety levels and paranoia the next day.