

How alcohol became a crutch for professional women

Some high-achieving female workers still drink to prove themselves, but those going sober have found benefits

Emma Jacobs DECEMBER 3 2023

Alcohol lubricated the working culture when Allyson Clark started out in the technology sector 15 years ago. The ethos, she said, was to “have a drink, stay out until 2am with your co-workers”. It was also a de-stressor. “Type A people push themselves all the time so alcohol becomes a way to relax.”

When Clark became a mother, alcohol turned into a treat at the end of a tough day. “You’re so stressed with kids, you work hard.” Women, particularly mothers, she said, are targeted by marketers, calling wine “mom juice” and encouraging “gin o’clock”.

Heavy drinking among professional women is a hidden problem, according to some experts. Sally Benton, executive director of Forward Trust, a charity providing services to people with drink and drug problems, cited a confluence of factors, including additional caring responsibilities on top of work-related pressures, anxiety, menopause symptoms or postnatal depression, that can prompt women to self-medicate. “Women’s experience of alcoholism can be different to men’s,” she said.

While alcohol-linked death rates are higher among people on low incomes, because they are more likely to suffer from other health problems and less likely to get help, men and women on higher salaries more commonly drink greater volumes, according to the NHS. Its research found that among women, [24 per cent of higher earners](#) drank at least 14 units a week, compared with 8 per cent in the lowest income households.

Men are still more likely to die as a result of alcohol than women: in 2020, there were 17.5 alcohol-related deaths per 100,000 men, compared with 8.7 among women. But as the pandemic exacerbated drinking problems, women began to catch up. Between 2019 and 2020 alcohol-related death rates increased by 24 per cent among women and 17 per cent among men.

Similar trends have been observed in the US. A report found mortality rates were increasing more rapidly among women than men.

Sandra Parker is a former accountant, working for companies including BP and Morgan Stanley, who now runs Just the Tonic, a coaching programme to help people overcome alcohol problems. After drinking heavily in her thirties and forties, she gave up in 2018 and now sees many high-functioning professional women using alcohol to cope with stress at work. “As you go further up the ranks, [there] tend to be fewer other females. So that can put a bit more pressure on women.” Drinking, as she knows from her own experience, is a way to numb anxieties. In the past, if she was worried about her job or health, she would have a drink to “shut down anxious thoughts”.



Sandra Parker, who runs Just the Tonic coaching programme, says she often sees high-achieving woman who drink to cope with the pressures of work

Janet Hadley, a human resources consultant who advises workplaces on alcohol policies, said: “The women who are now in their forties and fifties were the first generation to grow up with equal rights and equal pay. With that came equal ability to party and drink. However, women physiologically are not able to process alcohol as efficiently as men and this gets worse around menopause age.” She added that many women had felt pressure to be part of the “inner circle” at work, including drinking with “senior men in order to be considered for promotion”.

As offices rev up for the Christmas festivities, alcohol problems will worsen. Parker said many of her clients reported back from their work party not remembering part of the night, “horrified about whether they got too drunk. They’re really worried about going into work the next day, what people are saying about them, whether [they’ve] done something wrong.” She added that “December for most people is more stressful . . . We call it party season but I see people more upset, more agitated, because they’re trying to keep on [top of] their job, do all the things they were normally doing. They’ve got all these extra things their kids want to go to, plus the catering to their family.”

Work and drinking culture

While younger people joining the workforce are turning away from alcohol, many women who are now in their forties and fifties entered the workplace when drinking was a more accepted way to prove themselves. Sarah Williamson, a 45-year-old life coach, said she grew up “in a ladette culture. It felt really empowering to drink as much as men.” Another former recruiter said her entry to the City almost 30 years ago was formative. “I thought I’d joined a drinking club. [We] were actively encouraged to drink at lunchtime. Every night we’d get wine, drink and smoke at our desk.”

For others, it was a release or reward after work. Parker identified a hidden epidemic of professionals over 45 whose “tolerance is great but it’s still impacting them. They’ve got used to what that feels like. Because they’re high achieving, they push through.”

Williamson, too, drank to cope with her life as a working parent. “I drank to address the overwhelm. In my mid-forties, everything was perfect. I had a big circle of friends, a lovely husband, two kids, a dog, a lovely house. But on the inside I felt a rising panic, [to tackle] a list including professional and personal activities.” Alcohol was a way “to take the edge off, to find a shortcut to relaxation”.

Benton said “women are more fearful about speaking out” about alcohol because they “fear judgment”. Stereotypes of problem drinking — someone reaching rock bottom, crashing a car, or getting arrested — prevent women from recognising when alcohol has become harmful. “There’s a significant number of people structuring their life around alcohol” who were in need of help, she said.

Parker agreed: “There’s a taboo. Most people lie to their doctors. There’s a real embarrassment.” Clients will admit to her that they drink a bottle a night, but some, she suspects, are drinking even more. “It’s the combination of being a bit older, drinking at home. [They] can’t pretend it’s fun.”

Navigating work sober

Three years ago, Clark decided to quit drinking. The alcohol she thought was essential to networking turned out to be nothing of the sort. Last year, she started at Salesforce as lead solution engineer, and joined the tech company's Soberforce, an employee resource group made up of about 500 staff who do not drink due to dependency problems, religious, health reasons or, simply, taste. "You feel part of something that isn't in my own head. I will work my entire schedule to get to these meetings. It's been amazing . . . the benefits of having a community who get what it's like not to drink," she said.

Clark learnt to navigate work events sober. "The first year was the hardest. Now I don't feel tempted to drink. I just feel tempted to leave early." She said her initial fears that not staying late would mean missing out on opportunities were unfounded. However, she is still more guarded. "That can be a pro and a con. It's nice in work settings not to feel, what did I say, did I gossip, did I repeat a rumour? But the downside is you're not bonding."

Parker stressed there could be "a lot of pressure" at work events. "If we drink too much there's a stigma, but if we don't there's a stigma."

However, she has found giving up alcohol a positive experience. "You know who you have to speak to, and then you can decide when to leave." White agreed, saying she has become more discerning. "I won't go to events that I think are going to be dull and pointless. Life is short. I want to spend my time with people I enjoy having connecting conversations [with]."

Williamson's first work Christmas party in a London comedy club was miserable: "I was navigating really raw feelings. Everyone around me was plastered," she said. But for her, the benefits now far outstrip the negatives. "I always had a feeling of impending doom on Sunday nights. I thought it was just what work gives you. But when I gave up alcohol, that feeling was removed."