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I thought my drinking was normal even when I couldn't remember the night before

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FIRST PERSON



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Would it really be the end of the world? (Picture: Elizabeth Keates)

Lurching into work, I collapsed at my desk and took another tentative sip of my coffee.

'How are you feeling today?' my colleague asked.

'Could be better,' I grimaced. 'How about you?'

'Not great,' he grinned back. 'Was a good night, though.'

I didn't have a lot of self-confidence back then and suffered from anxiety, something that escalated **into panic attacks** when I started studying accountancy at university. I found having some alcohol would help me relax.

Well, while I was drinking anyway.

The next morning, I'd wake up, my stomach clenched with nerves, worrying about how I'd got home and whether I'd made a fool of myself.

I'd call friends to check I hadn't done anything too silly, casually ask how bad everyone else had been – and always **downplay my hangovers**, so people wouldn't think I was as drunk as I had been.



Growing up in Glasgow, everyone drank alcohol (Picture: Elizabeth Keates)

Thankfully my friends would laugh about how drunk they'd been – they barely seemed to notice the state I'd been in.

My panic easing, I'd always vow to not drink so much the next time. But after a couple, I'd forget my resolve and end up just as bad.

One Friday night, I got **the sleeper train** home to Glasgow with a friend and we decided to have a few wines. The next thing I knew, I was waking up, covered in vomit.

At the time, I laughed it off with my friend and we recounted the story like a badge of honour but there was a part of me that was terrified about how little control I had over alcohol.

Yet, it was the 1990s, **ladette culture** was at its peak and when I got a job in investment banking in London after graduating, I was thrust into a work-hard, play-hard environment.

'Eating is cheating,' my boss would say with a wink, as we went on yet another night out.

I lost count of the number of times I had to pull myself into work feeling dreadful the morning after the night before. The only silver lining – I thought – was that everyone was as drunk as each other, so I never had to be too embarrassed.

Yet, I couldn't deny it was having a massive impact on my life.

“ As my stomach lurched and my head spun, I realised I didn't want to feel like this ever again ”

I **missed several flights** from London to Glasgow, sometimes because I was too hungover to get up or drank too much and lost track of time.

At the time, I used to pretend it was the price to pay for living to the full and enjoying myself, pushing down my anxiety and worries.

I also used to go on **huge online shopping binges** when I was hungover, in an attempt to make myself feel better. I could easily spend hundreds of pounds and once bought five pairs of trainers – then I'd feel ashamed, guilty and anxious when the parcels arrived.

It wasn't like I was dependent upon alcohol, or woke up looking for a glass.

But I could never imagine going on holiday and not drinking. Or meeting a friend. Or eating in a restaurant.

It soon became what I was known for.

Every year, my work 'Secret Santa' would get me alcohol. My birthday cards were covered in cocktail glasses or flutes.



I didn't intend to cut booze out completely (Picture: Elizabeth Keates)

I remember booking **onto a yoga retreat**, then being furious when I realised that it was alcohol-free. Good job I'd brought along a couple of bottles of wine in my bag. The same thing happened on a holiday to Jordan.

At Christmas 2017, I went on a sailing trip from Thailand to Myanmar. On the boat, they only served beers but as we stepped off onto the beach, I noticed someone was coming around with a bottle of wine.

I could barely concentrate on my conversation, as I followed them with my eyes, tapping my foot in agitation, until they got to me.

I have no idea how much I drank, but when I woke up the next morning, I felt dreadful in my small cabin on a boat.

As my stomach lurched and my head spun, I realised I didn't want to feel like this ever again.

Recently, having hit my late 40s, I'd been taking care of myself a bit more, getting my life in order. I'd booked sessions **with a life coach**, started eating healthier, even ran a couple of marathons.

The only thing I hadn't addressed was my alcohol-intake.

I didn't intend to cut booze out completely but after signing up to an online course, I realised I needed a better understanding of why I was drinking in the first place.

It had always been a way to relax, of dealing with stress and anxiety. But, as I read more about alcohol, I realised that **it was actually contributing** to those feelings.

So in July 2018, I decided to ditch alcohol for a month.

'But we're going to Wimbledon – there's no way you can go there and not drink,' a friend told me, aghast.

For a second, I was horrified. How could I watch tennis without a Pimm's or prosecco in hand?

But after a few moments, I took a deep breath. Would it really be the end of the world?

When we got there, I sipped on an orange juice and, in between points, found myself watching the couple next to me. The man was constantly up and down – going to the bar, coming back with drinks, heading off to the toilet.

'How on earth can he concentrate?' I asked myself.

It was the same on nights out. After the first awkward half an hour, I found myself enjoying it as I kept a clear head while everyone around me was looking bleary.

And I loved it all the more the next day, when I woke up with a clear head.

'So this is what people mean when they say they're a morning person,' I thought, delightedly.

I decided to extend my break from alcohol to 100 days, while I figured out how to reintroduce it to my life.

'Will I only drink on weekends? Or special occasions?' I wondered daily. 'How many will I let myself have?'

Gradually, it dawned on me. If I didn't drink alcohol anymore, I wouldn't have any of these questions hanging over me.

Did I really need alcohol anymore?

'No,' I decided. 'I didn't.'

I haven't taken a sip of alcohol since. Instead, I've started my own business, Just the Tonic Coaching, which helps other people who are no longer in control of their relationship with alcohol.

Every single one of them has said that life without, or less, alcohol is better. More fun, not less.

And who wouldn't say 'cheers' to that?

As told to Sarah Whiteley. You can find out more about Sandra [here](#).