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# On the brink: Alcohol and high-achieving professional women

LAURA FORSYTH



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Although the word 'alcoholic' may conjure a particular stereotypical image, professional middle-aged women in their 40s and 50s are being highlighted as being more prone to addiction.

British women are among the biggest drinkers in the world and consume the same amount of [alcohol](#) as men, according to a Lancet study. Higher risk drinking peaked for women at age 50 and then fell over the next decades.

Additionally higher-risk drinkers tend to be men and women in better health, with higher income, more education, and who are more socially active.

An [NHS](#) Study also showed that the proportions of women who usually drank more than 14 units in a week (with above 14 units considered increased risk) varied across age groups, with two highest groups being aged 45 to 54 and 55 to 64.

The same survey also shows among women, the highest proportion of those who drank alcohol at increased or higher levels was in the highest income households: 24 per cent, compared with 9 per cent in the lowest income households.

Sober coach Sandra Parker, who runs the London-based alcohol support group Just the Tonic spoke to *City A.M.* about the rise of successful middle-aged women coming to her for help.

The Glaswegian moved to central London in her early twenties and enjoyed the work hard play hard culture where most social events revolved around alcohol. She had a successful corporate career for over 20 years but when Sandra reached her forties, she was keen to adopt a healthier lifestyle.

She says: “Many of my clients are high-achieving professionally and indeed, most people who know them have no idea they are struggling with alcohol.

“Due to their high-achieving nature, they are often able to perform at work and function to the level required for their job, but then drink a bottle of wine at night to switch off. So, there are often no obvious signs of a problem.”

The biggest misconception is most people’s image of a problem drinker as someone who is always propped up at the bar at the end of the night, or as a stereotypical alcoholic who has hit rock bottom and is drinking constantly from the moment they wake up.

But Sandra says: “In my experience, most professional women who drink more than they want to drink mainly at home and will avoid social situations because they fear being judged. And they tend to be high-functioning meaning they are able to maintain the performance levels required for their job but will suffer afterwards by feeling exhausted at the end of a working day.”

## **Support methods**

Sandra set up her programme, Just the Tonic, because when she was struggling, she couldn’t find anything aimed at her.

She said: “I was someone who did not identify with AA, or want the stigma attached to it, who knew NHS support was patchy and only available for chronic addiction, and who knew I needed a professional approach that was a form of life coaching to tackle the emotional issues behind my drinking.

“I also did not want to be told I had to stop drinking or sign up to some sort of sober pledge, and I found the only support and guidance was either to use common sense and drink responsibly or to call myself an alcoholic and join AA. Neither of which would have worked for me.”

“I designed Just the Tonic coaching to support professional high-achieving women looking for a solution that would fit in with their life, allow them to build their self-esteem and feel better about themselves, and give them the tools to tackle the issues they were using alcohol to numb out from, to handle work stress, anxiety, loneliness, relationship issues, bereavement and other life challenges.”

## **Preventative measures**

First of all, it is necessary to understand what alcohol actually is. It is marketed as a harmless indulgence, but it is actually a highly addictive drug. So, achieving a healthy relationship with a highly addictive drug will be difficult.

Sandra said: “A couple of principles I recommend if you do drink alcohol and want to be in control is to only ever drink at social occasions and to never use alcohol to self-medicate ie: to make you feel better. Studies have shown when we use alcohol in this way, it very quickly becomes a crutch and a dependency.

“I would also add that my definition of being in control over alcohol is to be able to take it or leave it without feeling deprived. This means being able to navigate any social situation without alcohol and feel that your enjoyment was in no way diminished by not drinking alcohol.”

## **Why successful middle-aged women?**

Based on her own experience overcoming alcohol in the past, Sandra believes the issue could be down to conditioning and marketing.

She says: “Women in their 40s and 50s grew up with the ‘ladette’ culture where partying and drinking at the same pace as men was labelled as empowering. This generation of women has been heavily marketed to by the alcohol industry, with alcopops targeting them when they were in their teens and early 20s and as they grow older, ‘memes’ joking about mothers needing wine.”

In the workplace, alcohol is seen as acceptable and is expected at any networking or social event, and as a result, many professional women use alcohol to unwind, de-stress and reward themselves at the end of the day.

The pandemic and lockdowns greatly increased the problem; working from home made it easier to drink during the week with no need to drive or be at the office the next day.

Alcohol was deemed essential and made more readily available with companies delivering alcohol to doorsteps. Stress levels went up as women were juggling working from home, looking after their families, home-schooling their children, and trying to take care of everyone else.

### **What signs indicate a high-achieving woman may be battling alcohol problems?**

- Inconsistent performance
  - Preference to work from home
  - Erratic or longer working hours
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### **How do workplace dynamics contribute to alcohol challenges for professional women?**

Most workplaces reflect a wider society where alcohol is front and centre of any social gathering. Many professional careers now involve travelling, attending conferences, networking, and socialising with clients, and there is an expectation that alcohol will be consumed at all of these events.

Sandra adds: “Women are still underrepresented at senior levels in most professions meaning there is extra pressure to fit in and be seen as ‘one of the boys’ and drink equivalent amounts to men despite physical differences meaning women will get drunk much quicker.”

### **How does alcohol affect mental health in professional women?**

Sandra says: “Everyone I have worked with has had mental health issues due to alcohol. Many professional women carry a huge amount of guilt and shame leading to low self-esteem, and anxiety about their drinking.” The main issues are:

- Increased anxiety
- Low self-esteem and feelings of guilt
- Fear
- Exhaustion and overwhelm.

### **Advice for women hesitant to seek help for alcohol problems?**

Sandra said: “First of all, stop blaming yourself. Don’t beat yourself up for developing a dependency on alcohol. Alcohol is a highly addictive drug, and you are not weak or flawed.”

“Expert help might feel daunting, but the right support will immediately feel like a burden has been lifted. I know that when I needed help, the most important factors were confidentiality, empathy and optimism.

“I recommend a solution with individual support to identify the causes of your drinking in a way that addresses the root cause and makes you feel better. This is not an overnight fix but getting control over alcohol is the one thing that changes everything.”

## **Strategies for to combat alcohol dependency**

Write down exactly how much you are drinking over a week.

Be honest with yourself about why you feel the need to drink – is it stress, overwhelm, anxiety, or work or relationship issues, etc?

Reduce your drinking gradually and then try to take a month off it completely.

The vast majority of people who drink more than they want, are not physically addicted but have a psychological dependency. Simply put, for most people they are drinking to avoid their emotions.

This is key as to be able to feel good about drinking less or not at all, you will have to tackle the underlying reasons why you drink. If this feels too overwhelming or difficult to do alone then reach out for expert support.

## **Do stigmas hinder professional women from seeking alcohol help?**

Sandra says: “Yes, in a number of ways. Our society views problem drinkers in a very negative light – as being weak willed or in some way flawed, and women more so than men. As a result of the stigma, most people are hesitant to ask for help.

“They fear that if they admit to how much they drink to their doctor or through an employee support system, it will be on their records and there could be negative repercussions in the future. For women particularly, the more successful they are in their career, the more they feel they will be judged and the more they have to lose.”

## **Impact of alcohol issues on careers**

Sandra says: “From my experience, professional women with a drinking problem will prioritise work commitments over their own wellbeing. This may mean exerting extra effort at work, working longer hours and at weekends, at the expense of their own wellbeing.”

The impact on their wellbeing is much greater. Firstly, with regard mental health, most of these women carry a huge amount of guilt and shame leading to low self-esteem, and anxiety about their drinking. This can lead to trying to overcompensate with loved ones, leading to more exhaustion and low self-care.

In terms of physical health, as well as the hidden physical damage being caused to organs such as the liver and heart. Most regular drinkers have poor quality sleep, which combined with mental health issues mean they have low energy and are trying to keep everything going. Doing what they have to whilst feeling exhausted, with low self-worth.

For more information and support visit [Just the Tonic Coaching](#).

## **Success stories of women overcoming alcohol dependency**

### **Helen's story**

#### **How much were you drinking and what problems was it causing?**

At least a bottle of wine a night, more at the weekend. It was impacting the relationship with my partner and with my kids, my motivation at work, anxiety and depression, poor sleep. It was causing a lot of problems.

#### **What was the key reason you wanted to change; what motivated you?**

My family. They deserved someone that was present in their lives. My kids are very small at the moment, and I want them to grow up being proud of me.

#### **Were you sceptical this method would work?**

I don't think I was sceptical; I was hopeful it would. It felt like a bit of a last resort, having previously tried all sorts of 'rules' to moderate.

#### **What had you tried before to cut down or have a break from alcohol?**

Plenty of rules to try to moderate, which I'm sure you are familiar with! I'll leave after two drinks, I'll drink water in between, I'll only have half a bottle of wine tonight etc. Dry January, Sober October. I felt amazing when I didn't drink but just couldn't sustain it. As soon as I had a drink, my drinking starting to creep back up and soon I was back to the same level as I was before (if not more).

#### **What results did you get?**

Sleep. This is a huge one for me. Two small kids have meant years of sleep deprivation! Which was only compounded by alcohol. The feeling of waking up after a 'clean' sleep, for me, is amazing. A calmer house, a more patient parent and partner, less anxiety, more energy. A new job! It's all good.

### **What impact has it made to your relationship with your partner and children?**

So much better. I can get up with the kids and not be grumpy, I have the energy to play with them, and calmly deal with tantrums.

### **What impact has it made to your career performance?**

More motivation, clarity, enthusiasm. I applied for a promotion while on the course and got it! I would never have had the energy, or the self-confidence to do this while I was drinking.

## **Lilian's story**

### **How much were you drinking and what problems was it causing?**

My alcohol intake had been higher than I wanted for around 15 years. I started working in the centre of London which had a work hard, play hard culture. Over the last two to three years (and especially over the pandemic), it had gone up to around two bottles of wine almost every night.

I knew it was causing me to sleep badly. I also suspected it was affecting my levels of stress and anxiety, alongside moods, but I wasn't entirely certain to what effect. I was also constantly thinking of alcohol – when I could have a drink, that a drink would enhance my enjoyment of the event I was at, that I was feeling deprived if alcohol wasn't part of the event I was at or activity I was doing.

### **What was the key reason you wanted to change; what motivated you?**

I wanted to regain control over alcohol and to stop it being so firmly in the top of my thoughts. I also wanted to see the effect it would have on my sleep, moods and stress levels.

### **Were you sceptical this method would work?**

I was quite sceptical. I couldn't believe that something which was so ingrained in me could change after only three months.

### **Did you try before to cut down or have a break from alcohol?**

Yes, and I've lost count of how many times and ways! I had a break for 6 weeks a few years ago, but I felt anxious throughout as I white knuckled it and as soon as I drank again, I slipped back into the same routine. More recently I tried to use my willpower to moderate or quit for a few days. Every time I did, I just felt deprived and like a reward of a drink was deserved for a day or two off drinking.

### **What results did you get?**

The first most amazing and unbelievable result is that I can now sleep. I've spent most of my life believing I'm a bad sleeper, destined to wake up every night at 2am and toss and turn for hours. I've discovered that this isn't true – I can now sleep, and it's been absolutely life changing. The physical effects are that my skin is clearer and brighter, I don't feel constantly bloated and my stress levels are far lower. The relationship with my partner has improved because I'm now present when I'm with him. My stress levels are lower and I'm happier which is making all of my relationships – friends, family, everything is just better. I no longer feel deprived when I don't drink, and I find that events are more fun because of that. Then of course, there's the lack of hangovers – that's also an amazing feeling.

### **Anne's story**

#### **How much were you drinking and what problems was it causing?**

I was drinking one to two bottles a night, but it had also progressed to morning drinking when I couldn't cope with the hangovers. In all honesty once I started drinking, I would be on a binge for two to three days, sometimes more, which included some quite severe morning and daytime drinking.

#### **What was the key reason you wanted to change; what motivated you?**

So many things! But mostly my relationship starting to fall apart, my hatred of myself for never being able to commit or stick to anything, and my fear that it was affecting the job I loved so much.

#### **Were you sceptical this method would work?**

Of course, I was more than sceptical just because I have failed so many times before, I did it out of desperation, but was fairly sure it wouldn't work. I was wrong.

#### **Did you try before to cut down or have a break from alcohol?**

Yes, for about five years and more if you count me just generally being unhappy with my consumption.



## **What results did you get?**

Too many to list – but overall, just a self-love and appreciation, a realisation that all the many things I was so convinced I need alcohol for like socialising, relaxation, connection with people and a million other things. I just didn't. It was a crazy thing to realise – it felt like meeting my teenage self again.

## **What are you most excited about now that you are alcohol free?**

Feeling safe with myself. Trusting that I will constantly be someone who I know and connect with, as opposed to the horror show that I had become when i drank – I was untrustworthy, unpredictable, unproductive and inaccessible (especially to my partner) and now I am none of those things, and am able to be someone I like.