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Do YOU have a problem with drink? Take our quiz before you say no...

As figures show female deaths
from alcohol soared following
lockdown, a binge drinker turned
'sober coach' shares the questions
every woman should ask herself



COLLEAGUES in the solicitors' firm where she worked regarded my client, Georgina — in her Hobbs suits, her hair swept back in a neat chignon — as a woman very much in control of her life. But though she took pains to be

by Sandra Parker

professional and efficient in the office, Georgina's make-up and cheery smile hid a painful secret. Each night, she went home alone and drank two bottles of pinot noir by

herself. An empty-nester in her 50s, she would then call her three children to viciously criticise them and their

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Pictures: JUDE EDGINGTON. Hair and make-up: AMANDA CLARKE AT JOY GOODMAN



Six years sober: Coach Sandra Parker

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father, whom she had divorced some years earlier. By the time Georgina reached out to me two years ago, her alcohol consumption had wreaked such devastation on her relationships with her family that she had not been invited to her youngest daughter's wedding and her older children were refusing to let her see her grandchildren.

Almost all of the women I help are professionals like Georgina (doctors, dentists, teachers, City workers) who drink between seven and ten bottles of wine a week, on average.

Most are in their 40s and 50s, and though some have drunk all their adult lives, others end up relying on alcohol later in life, to

cope with the struggles that often come with middle age.

What I see as a sober coach tallies with NHS statistics: women aged between 45 and 64 are most likely to drink in excess of recommended safe limits — 60 per cent of female deaths caused by alcohol in 2021 were among women in this age group — while a quarter of these are in the households with the highest incomes.

This week, new figures from the Office for National Statistics revealed death by drinking among women rocketed by 37 per cent between 2019 and 2022 in the wake of pandemic lockdowns, with middle-aged women particularly affected.

The challenges facing women during middle age are, of course, numerous: menopause, raising teenagers, caring for elderly parents, divorce, being overlooked at work and empty nests, to name but a few.

With my help, they accept problem drinking doesn't always mean consuming litres of vodka every day. And, while you might think a glass of white wine seems like the perfect way to unwind at the end of a demanding day, perhaps you, too, could be slipping into problematic drinking habits that could have a detrimental impact on your relationships, your work and your health.

The downward slope to losing control and relying on alcohol as a crutch can be subtle. So much so, that many women don't realise they are already in a negative pattern when it comes to drink.

The women I work with don't consider themselves alcoholics — and are a long way from the image of someone sleeping on a park bench, brown paper bag in hand. They're still, mostly, keeping all the balls in the air, both at work and at home.

However, they all have one thing in common: they have come to depend on alcohol to 'relax'; give them the courage — or motivation — to attend social events; and enjoy family time, including Christmases and holidays.

They have often spent years convincing themselves that, as they've managed to hold on to their job, home, family and friends, their drinking is not a problem. One client,

There's so much subterfuge. They often even delude themselves

Alicia, an engineer, told me how she'd polish off a bottle of wine within half an hour of coming home, while cooking the family dinner — and then, because her husband and children hadn't witnessed it, she'd hope no one would notice she was drunk.

She had various hiding places for the empty bottles, which she would put out with the recycling in the dead of night, while her family and neighbours slept.

There's so much subterfuge involved. Clients hide their consumption levels from so many people, and often even delude themselves about the extent of their alcohol intake.

So what makes me the perfect person to help?

A former drinker myself, I am all too familiar with the fear my clients feel about life without alcohol, plus the guilt, shame and waves of anxiety that greet you the morning after a night about which you have little recollection.

Seven years ago, I was a City worker on a six-figure salary, yet I was binge drinking. I even suffered

the occasional blackout. The turning point came for me when I blacked out on a sailing trip around Asia, in late 2017.

I had spent thousands on the holiday, yet wasted a whole day in my cabin, crying and trying to remember if I'd insulted anyone or made a fool of myself while drunk the night before.

I knew I needed help. But there's no way I'd have gone to Alcoholics Anonymous, as I was too scared of my colleagues finding out and looking down on me.

I had a serious alcohol dependency — what doctors would call alcohol use disorder — but, like 90 per cent of the problem drinkers I now help, I wasn't physically addicted.

This meant that, instead of experiencing physical withdrawal, the challenges I faced when I tried to give up alcohol were emotional ones.

During the first half of 2018, I worked with a life coach and tried a few free online support groups.

I recorded every drink on an app when I was 'doing well', then discarded it every time I drank more than I wanted. I also read dozens of books on cutting back.

Finally, in July, I felt able to temporarily cut out drink altogether

I tell clients: 'It's not your fault.' Alcohol is highly addictive

and, six months on, I realised I felt much happier and a lot less anxious when I didn't drink, so why ever start again? It has now been six years since my last drink.

I was so blown away by how much better I felt as a result of being free from alcohol that I decided to train to help others like me quit.

I launched the online coaching company Just The Tonic, and 'sober coaching' is now my full-time job.

I have devised a 12-week online programme, consisting of both group and individual sessions, during which most clients cut down before taking a 30-day break from alcohol.

The aim is to help clients achieve control so that, instead of fighting a desire to drink, we remove the need. They can then decide whether to drink occasionally or not at all.

The first thing I tell clients is: 'It's not your fault.' Alcohol is a highly addictive substance, and while abuse of it may be on a spectrum, we are all susceptible to it.

Indeed, I believe the majority of regular drinkers consume more than they intend.

The programme involves a gradual reduction in intake, while clients explore the feelings they have been trying to numb with alcohol.

I then support them so that they are able to handle their emotions without needing alcohol, which clients describe as their secret superpower.

I've worked with well over 100 women. Some were spurred into signing up after the results of a blood test showing fatty liver disease or elevated liver enzymes.

But the majority just felt permanently below par, and wanted to be liberated from that crippling cycle of drink and regret.

And watching them finally break free of that cycle makes my job so worthwhile.

■ NAMES have been changed
As told to HELEN CARROLL



How many of these statements do you agree with — be honest!



Picture: GETTY

SO, could YOU have an undiagnosed problem with drink?
Read these statements and count up how many you agree with...

- ☐ You prefer to drink alone.
- ☐ After a busy day at work, you look forward to rewarding yourself with wine.
- ☐ You drink more than your friends, but you can get away with it because you have a high tolerance and some of them are lightweight.
- ☐ You often tell yourself, first thing in the morning, that you're not going to drink that day, but somehow you end up drinking.
- ☐ You're conscious of the number of empty bottles you accumulate and find ways to hide them from others in your home or your neighbours.
- ☐ If asked by a doctor how much you drink, you'd probably lie, believing everybody drinks more than the recommended limit.
- ☐ You find people who don't drink boring and judgmental and would rather socialise with people who are fun and know how to enjoy themselves with a drink.
- ☐ You know you are not an alcoholic because you always wait until 6pm to start drinking, except for on bank holidays and special occasions.
- ☐ At weekends, or on nights out, you can finish a bottle of wine on your own, but you always go for a run the next day to sweat out the toxins.
- ☐ You never miss work because of a hangover — even if you feel awful, you can push through.
- ☐ You drink most evenings but only drink wine and never touch spirits.
- ☐ You drink daily, but you have lots of friends who drink more than you and they are all fine.
- ☐ You find yourself sneaking in extra drinks, either at the bar or in the kitchen, out of sight of your family.
- ☐ Your partner has expressed concern about how much you drink, but you tell yourself they're just a killjoy.
- ☐ You notice friends and relatives avoid your calls at night, aware that you will have been drinking.
- ☐ The following day you struggle to remember much of what you did, or what was said, the night before while you were drinking.
- ☐ The thought of not drinking heavily at Christmas, on holiday or at a wedding fills you with dread.
- ☐ You fall asleep quickly, comatose, after drinking at night, but wake again in the early hours feeling anxious and dehydrated.

IF YOU answered yes to six or more of the statements in the box above, it could be time to address your relationship with alcohol. Here, Sandra offers her expert advice on making the first steps towards taking back control...

■ **FIRST**, let me be clear that these are steps designed for drinkers not physically addicted to alcohol. Anyone concerned that they are physically addicted should always consult a doctor before changing their relationship with alcohol.

■ IF YOU feel confident that your relationship with alcohol is more emotional, start an alcohol diary. Each day make a note of how much you drank the day before. Do this for two weeks.

You should also record the circumstances, such as whether you drank alone or in a social setting, and the reasons why you drank — for example as a reward, because you were stressed, or to celebrate something.

■ **REVIEW** your notes and be honest when answering the following three questions:

- Am I drinking most nights?
- Am I drinking for pleasure, or do I use alcohol as a crutch?
- How do I feel the morning after I have been drinking?

■ **CONTINUE** with your diary and challenge yourself to reduce your alcohol intake for the next 30 days. Most people find it easier to pick one or more days each week to not drink, rather than drinking less alcohol each night.

On those days when you do not drink, make a plan to do something fun instead. If you normally go home and have a couple of glasses of wine, could

you go for a walk, head to the gym or drive to visit a friend?

■ **REVIEW** your progress at the end of week one. If you are struggling emotionally, consider what tools you could use to help manage those emotions. For example, if you are drinking because you feel lonely, what are the easy ways to increase social connection?

Taking a small step such as arranging to meet a friend or going to an exercise class will help you build confidence and give you something to look forward to that feels better than drinking at home alone.

■ IF THIS is working, keep up the momentum and work up to taking a

break from alcohol for 30 days. This gives you a chance to start making changes in your life that feel good.

Your diary will help you to better understand your emotions and give you the tools to tackle challenges without alcohol.

■ IF THIS is not working, it is important to be honest with yourself and commit to getting help. Do not beat yourself up. If you are struggling with alcohol, this does not mean that there is something wrong with you.

Alcohol is a highly addictive substance, and many people need expert support to uncover the issues that are keeping them stuck.

■ **DECIDE** on the help that is right for you. I recommend an approach that includes individual and group support, with like-minded people. This should include a plan customised to take into account your particular challenges, based on the findings you recorded in your diary.

justthetoniccoaching.com

And what your answers reveal about you...