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During the day I earned a six-figure salary – then at night drank until blacking out

After going to extreme measures to wind down, a former City worker now devotes her life to helping other high-functioning alcoholics

Sandra Parker

11 April 2024 • 12:19pm



'It never crossed my mind that I had a problem because everyone else seemed to be doing the same' | CREDIT: Elizabeth Keates Film & Photography

[I never drank in the morning and rarely drank alone.](#) I was holding down a prestigious, high-pressured job, earning a six-figure salary in a well-known bank and keeping fit too. I ran regularly, completing two marathons and proudly telling everyone I'd still drunk wine the night before the run.

It was the 1990s and the culture was work hard, play hard, pouring ourselves into the bar after a long day in the office four nights a week. I'd arrive wearing a smart suit and both contact lenses but a few hours and two bottles of wine later, I'd be groping around on pub floors trying to find one I'd lost. Or I'd pass out still wearing them, and urgently needing an optician to fish them out the next day. I would black out, my body's alcohol levels so high that my brain couldn't form new memories.

My boss would laugh that "eating is cheating" so food was never involved and the next day, we sported our hangovers like a badge of honour. I'm only 5ft 4in yet prided myself on being a "tough" Glaswegian. It never crossed my mind that I had a problem because everyone else seemed to be doing the same.

I was often sick, not just in the privacy of my own bathroom, but – to my shame – openly in bars. I'd wake up plagued with remorse and anxiety while hazily piecing together the evening's events. What did I say? Who did I argue with? Who did I snog? How the hell did I get home? The panic was often overwhelming. I'd swear off booze or promise myself I would only drink at weekends, or not to the point of getting drunk, but I simply didn't have an "off switch".

Things got more out of hand than usual one evening after a party in south London. I shared a taxi home with two friends and, after the driver had dropped them off, he kept getting lost. Or perhaps I couldn't remember my street but we seemed to go round and round until I'd become aggressive. Finally at my flat he angrily said the money I had wasn't enough. I tried shoving all these coins at him which fell to the floor of the cab. Then he turned around and punched me in the face. There was blood all over my work clothes and my teeth felt loose. I stumbled out of the car in tears.

In recovery circles people talk about reaching their "rock bottom": the very lowest moment during addiction that generally provides the kick up the arse to stop. For me, there are just too many horrors to pick from – from blacking out to vomiting in public and being punched in the face by that taxi driver.

Alcohol would have killed me if I'd carried on my 35-year relationship with it. My first experience of drinking was cider aged 14. For many Gen X-ers like me this was the standard entry-level drink, shared among friends at people's houses. I enjoyed the warm fuzzy feeling and giggles.



Sandra: 'Alcohol would have killed me if I'd carried on my 35-year relationship with it'

I'd always felt insecure about my ability and the way I looked. When I started at Strathclyde University at 17, I noticed how everyone else seemed sophisticated while I was naturally geeky, shy and terribly short-sighted. I'd recently upgraded my thick NHS glasses for ones I thought were cooler, then I heard someone call me "Elton John". I felt crushed.

Growing up, there would only be alcohol in our Glasgow home on special occasions. But as a student, I soon realised that holding a pint of cider and blackcurrant gave me some confidence propping up the students' union bar. I never wanted to get drunk, just to feel more relaxed – that pleasant feeling after a couple of pints or vodkas. But that's why alcohol is so sneaky, by the time you're two

drinks down you try to maintain that confident, emboldened feeling with more. And soon you start needing more alcohol to reach that point.

After I graduated I got a job in a small accountancy firm in Scotland where everyone seemed to have come from a grander background than me. Once again I turned to my friend alcohol as a crutch, a way of being able to socialise.

Then at 24 I got a job at the investment bank Morgan Stanley and moved to London. I was the only female on my team – and I prided myself on being able to keep up with the men. But while they ordered pints I downed white wine – far stronger. They would get merry and I would be totally smashed.



When Sandra took a year out to go travelling, she drank every single night | CREDIT: Sandra Parker

I took a step back from it all when, at 28, I was facing [burnout](#). I took a year out to go travelling around Asia and Australasia. It would have been the perfect chance to knock the boozing on the head, but instead I drank beer, spirits or wine every night.

There was always a backpacker to stay up late with. When I rang my mum and told her this, “Well you’re on holiday aren’t you?” she said. The problem was I was on holiday every single day. For a whole year. When I returned from my trip, I slipped back into my London life just as before. Apart from now, I felt I was something of a wine connoisseur: “I’ll have an oak-based chardonnay please.”

I knew I was a mess but I also knew that standing up and sharing my stories in an AA-style support group just wasn’t for me.

Aged 49, I finally took my first step – finding a life coach to help with the [anxiety](#) that was by then crippling. Gently, she guided me rather than telling me off. I devoured every book I could find about alcohol, joined online support groups and learned how to meditate.

Alcohol is an addictive drug. I realised this wasn’t all my fault. I also thought about the things I was trying to numb through drinking – anxiety, self-consciousness, not feeling good enough. I realised that if I had a dry night, the next-day nerves were more manageable. I decided to try a month of not drinking, then three months, six, and a

year. I'd always told myself if I managed 12 months then I could just drink moderately after that.



Sandra now coaches full-time, helping others with their relationship with alcohol
| CREDIT: Elizabeth Keates Film & Photography

I never imagined I would want to stop forever. But after a whole year of ordering “just a tonic” at bars I saw how much more I enjoyed life. I reclaimed the mornings and felt calmer, more in control. I ate better. My digestion, skin and energy levels were vastly improved. Now I work as a coach myself and I tell everyone to take a selfie before

they stop drinking as the difference before and after is so huge.

Six years on and I've never been happier. I don't say I'm sober, which sounds joyless; I say I'm alcohol-free. Liberated from what was causing me harm.

I took redundancy from BP, my last workplace at the end of 2021, and now I coach full-time, gently helping others like me. I never instruct anyone to “stop drinking”, instead I help them feel ambivalent about alcohol. Take it or leave it; it doesn't control you. The good thing about helping high-functioning people who are dependent on alcohol (a term I prefer to “alcoholic” which stigmatises people, is that they realise they have so much more to gain by ditching alcohol from their life. Just like I did.

Signs you might have an unhealthy attitude towards alcohol, according to Sandra

- People tie themselves in knots wondering what exactly is “too much” – it's much easier to just ask “are you drinking more than you'd like?” and if the answer's yes, then you probably are.
- Are you trying to justify your drinking? Common ways we justify might be “I only drink nice wine/I never drink before 6pm/I drink but I eat well and exercise/I have a high tolerance”. If you need to justify why you drink, it's problematic.

- Are you drinking more than you used to?
- Do you ever struggle to remember the end of the night?

As told to Susanna Galton

Sandra runs 11-week courses at [justthetoniccoaching.com](https://www.justthetoniccoaching.com)