



# 'OUTWARDLY, I LOOKED LIKE A SUPERWOMAN. IN PRIVATE, I HAD A DRINK PROBLEM'

Many of us leant on alcohol during the pandemic, but some never managed to stop. *Natasha Poliszczuk* reports on the rise of professional women doing everything to hide their alcohol abuse

FOR MANY WOMEN, the Covid lockdown was a highly stressful time of working from home while child-wrangling – but at least there were 6pm cocktails to take the edge off, and a glass or two of wine with dinner. After all, we'd earned it and we needed it. One in five people drank more frequently during lockdown – that's 8.6 million adults in the UK.

Most of us went back to normal but, for some, the habit stuck. In 2023, 71.2% of adults were consuming alcohol at least once a week, compared to only 54% in 2019. A report last year found that British women are the biggest binge drinkers in the world – defined as six drinks in a session – and deaths from alcohol are now at a record high, after spiking in these post pandemic years.

'The pandemic had a massive impact on our drinking ,' says Sandra Parker of [Just The Tonic alcohol-free coaching](#). 'Two thirds of the clients I speak to mention lockdown, and the most common thing I hear is that they were drinking like it was the weekend every night of the week. There was no one to see how much we drank and we didn't have to go into work the next day – the guardrails came off.'

Jenny\* , 47, a GP in West Sussex, confirms she's noticed a marked rise in alcohol related issues in her patients – particularly in women, who are more vulnerable to liver disease. They are also less likely to seek help, because of stigma. 'But then we all drank

more during the pandemic,’ she adds with a sigh. ‘I did – and I’m a doctor.’

So did Abi\*, who was then 44. Pre pandemic she was a social drinker but, during lockdown, she worked from home while home-schooling her kids. ‘I was lonely and anxious, so my drinking start time crept earlier and earlier. I’d open a bottle of wine at lunchtime and end up drinking two bottles most days.’

*“A SECRET DRINKING HABIT IS A VERY LONELY PLACE. I WAS SO UNHAPPY”*

It became habitual. Post-pandemic, Abi raced back from work to drink before her boys got home from school. When she socialised, she would drive so that people would see her not drinking , ‘But when I came home, I’d have a bottle of wine. It got to the point where I would take the dog for a walk so I could drink in a field.’ Her husband begged her to seek help. Her eldest son hid alcohol from her. ‘A secret drinking habit is a very lonely place,’ she says. ‘I was so unhappy, I thought about killing myself.’

Becky\*, 46, is driven, focused and hugely successful. She had never considered herself a problem drinker but, as a single parent, the stress of the pandemic tipped her over the edge. ‘I was

drinking two bottles of wine every day. No one was watching or judging.'

When normal life resumed, she carried on. 'I was super-functioning. I was at the gym every day, running my business – I was super woman with a crutch. I thought alcohol was my friend. It made me relaxed, happier. But it was eating away at me.'

Eventually, in desperation, Abi and Becky turned to Sandra Parker, who explains we are conditioned by highly effective and lucrative marketing. In our culture, we also see alcohol as benign and normal. 'But it's an illusion. We're in collective denial. Willpower is not the solution. We need to shift our entire mindset about alcohol : it's a highly addictive substance.'

If you want to cut back, she advises, focus on why you're drinking. 'Use the acronym HALTT to ask yourself why you want this drink. "Am I hungry? Anxious ? Lonely ? Tired? Thirsty ?" How will you feel if you drink? It won't ultimately make you feel great or help you have a good night's sleep. It won't feel like a reward the next day.'

Your GP can use a simple test, such as the AUDIT (alcohol use disorders identification test) questionnaire, to ascertain your level of alcohol use and discuss the treatment options available – you

could be referred to the local alcohol intervention team, offered counselling or helped with detoxing (which should be done with medical supervision, as sudden withdrawal can be dangerous). You can also contact Alcohol Change UK or Alcoholics Anonymous.

For Abi and Becky, sobriety has meant being fitter, happier and healthier. ‘I was hiding behind alcohol, but this is the real me,’ says Becky. Her friends are fascinated. ‘They want to know my secret. So many people then open up about their own habits and lockdown often comes up. But drinking to feel less alone is chasing a lie. I tell them they can do it – they can get their life back.’

## **8 SIGNS YOUR DRINKING IS A PROBLEM**

- You drink more than you want to.
- You feel guilty about your alcohol consumption.
- You resolve not to drink – yet find yourself having ‘just one’ (which often leads to another).
- You crave the feeling alcohol gives you, to relax or de-stress.
- You can’t imagine not drinking on holiday or a night out.
- You drink alone – and drink more than you do when with other people.

- You are secretive or lie about your drinking.
- Your drinking exceeds the weekly recommended amount (for women, 14 units or 6 medium glasses of wine), but you excuse it as 'normal' and 'everyone else is doing it'.

\*NAMES HAVE BEEN CHANGED.