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I blamed my demotion on brain fog – but my drinking was the problem

I'd gone to university at 40 to get a degree, and made a success of myself. But alcohol made me a shambles

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Alcohol



'For me, the hardest thing was not drinking on a Friday night', says Siobhan

I never – and still do not – see myself as an [alcoholic](#). It's an ugly word laden with such stigma, one I reserve for the people who were pouring Bailey's on their cornflakes.

But not me. Even during my lowest moments, I never drank in the daytime (apart from at Sunday lunch, when wine was opened as I cooked the roast). I would never have dreamed of drinking at work and I'd always abstain on Mondays and Tuesdays. Two nights alcohol-free is what the doctors always recommend after all.

I never calculated exactly how many units I was consuming, I was aware it would be well over the [14 recommended a week for women](#), and it would have scared me, so I pushed it to the back of my mind.

I've been with my husband for 35 years, though we only tied the knot in 2016. Dene is a kind and lovely man, not the type to criticise, but he'd raise an eyebrow as I uncorked yet again, "are you sure you want to drink tonight?" he gently asked.

But I'd get belligerent after a few drinks so it was like a red rag to a bull and he didn't push it. Or my younger daughter Georgia, who still lived at home then, would say, "[do you have to, Mum?](#)". I shrugged them off, but deep down knew they were right. I just didn't know *how* to stop.



'Dene is a kind and lovely man, not the type to criticise, but he'd raise an eyebrow as I uncorked yet again'

No one can drink like that without soon suffering the effects. At night I'd drench through my pyjamas in sweat and have to change them. You could set a clock by my 3am waking, heart pounding, and with a mouth like the bottom of a birdcage.

I'd anxiously toss and turn until it was time to get up and I'd feel utterly exhausted. Full of remorse, I'd swear to myself not to drink again later. By 6pm I'd feel fine, think "sod it" and do it all over again.

When I started [working from home](#) things got even worse. As a project manager for an international manufacturing company, much of my job required the successful transferring of parts, which became critical as war raged in Ukraine and we needed titanium. If I wasn't on the phone having confrontational talks with multiple stakeholders, I was juggling endless spreadsheets, budgets and analysing data.



Siobhan on her wedding day in Crete in 2016 with her daughter Rachel (L), husband Dene and daughter Georgia

I was doing a slightly different job and felt unsure about the new system implemented. Without colleagues sitting beside me I couldn't easily ask someone for help, so I lost confidence. I'd do video calls with my camera off, then collapse on the sofa afterwards feeling terrible. I'd lost all the sharpness that I'd prided myself on and I had constant "[brain fog](#)", struggling to focus.

Unsurprisingly, this lacklustre performance at work was noticed. Within a few months, I was demoted. I was devastated. I'd gone to university as a mature student at 40 to get a degree, and made a success of myself. Now, I felt I was a shambles.

I'd been on antidepressants for nearly two decades after finding the juggle of kids and a career very hard during my 30s. Here I was, overwhelmed by crippling work anxiety, and in danger of seeing the career I'd grafted so hard for going down the pan.

I was deeply ashamed of my drinking. I secretly listened to podcasts about quitting and bought a book, which admittedly was used just as a coaster on my bedside table. I paid £30 for an online course three times, but I was [never accountable to anyone](#), and failed three times.

I'd stick to my "dry" two days, mainly because I was generally too hungover on Mondays to drink. I'd pat myself on the back for abstaining for two days and then "reward" myself by drinking with gusto come Wednesday night.

Things came to a head in March 2022, when I was eventually signed off sick with depression and [menopause symptoms](#). I desperately didn't want to lose it all. It was one Sunday night when I was home alone and sober when I saw a Facebook advert pop up for a course called [Just The Tonic](#), grateful that my online algorithms had clearly clocked that I was curious.

I picked up the phone and spoke to Sandra Parker, the woman who ran it. She didn't sugar-coat anything but was entirely non-judgemental as I bawled my eyes out, admitting out loud for the first ever time that I had a problem.

“I'm drinking far more than is good for me and it's affecting my life,” I cried. “I'm sick and tired of feeling sick and tired all the time.” Just getting those words out felt a huge relief.

The course was structured over 11 weeks and I was put in a small group for online meetings. I didn't have to go cold turkey; on this course, you start out drinking with the aim of cutting back. I began extending the amount of [alcohol-free days](#) I had from two, to three, to four, then five.

I'd still have my beers, but realised I didn't need the wine on top. Listening to the others admit things, like that they would drink only moderately at social events and then come home and drink more alone, made me realise my “shameful” secrets were actually common.



Siobhan at a music festival in 2023, holding a can of alcohol-free beer

We realised together that after a week of not drinking wine, we could smell it and decide it actually tastes quite foul – but we’d got used to insanely “ploughing on with it” anyway.

I had wobbly moments. I was terrified I’d be the anomaly this programme just wouldn’t work for. But as a wise lady said to me, “the man at the top of the mountain didn’t just fall there – he worked to get there.” And so did I.

A few weeks in I had to tell Georgia to leave the room as I had a meeting. It was the first time I'd admitted that I'd joined a stop drinking group. She threw her arms around me and said: "Oh Mum, that's the best thing I've ever heard." I also told Dene, who said he was relieved.

I did start taking [hormone replacement therapy \(HRT\)](#), but after an embarrassingly short time (a month) of stopping drinking, every single symptom went away. I slept longer and deeper, with no more night sweats.

I'd wake hearing the birds sing, and realised how lovely it was. It was amazing not to feel dreadful, and to actually have a Saturday morning.



Siobhan pictured with the saxophone she treated herself to after 100 days of not drinking | CREDIT: Lorne Campbell/Guzelian

I was still allowing myself to drink some days, and I could clearly see that after the 20 minute high, you just spend the rest of the night chasing that feeling and feel awful the next day.

I started swimming at the local pool three times a week with a friend which further lifted my mood. For me, the hardest thing was not drinking on a Friday night. Now, I treat myself to a Magnum ice cream instead, and remind myself that the real prize is drinking a brew in the garden on Saturday morning, instead of guiltily wasting it in bed.



Siobhan having afternoon tea at The Savoy on her 700th day alcohol-free

I also started keeping a “brag book”, writing down three things a day I was proud of, even if it was just putting on a wash or cooking dinner. By the end of the course, I’d achieved the 30 alcohol-free day challenge, and treated myself to a speedboat on the Thames, followed by a meal at Hawksmoor, and then Abba Voyage at the O2. My 100-day gift to myself was a saxophone, which I’d always wanted to learn. In 18 months I’m now in Grade 3.

It's not always easy. The first wedding, holiday and Christmas sober are weird. But I didn't waiver. I go to parties and no one has to hide alcohol from me – I just don't want it. And I'm always grateful when someone thinks to buy [non-alcoholic tipples](#) so I don't feel left out.

After a year of not drinking I was promoted again at work, which felt *so* good. I even came off antidepressants after two decades. I've been alcohol-free since June 2022. And I still keep a brag book. Tonight I will write this entry: "I told my story to *The Telegraph*. I felt embarrassed, but I did it because I want to help someone else like me change their life too."

Siobhan's life hack for going alcohol-free

- Reassure your friends that your decision not to drink won't spoil their fun. Take booze-free beers or No-secco to parties so you don't feel left out sipping water or Diet Coke.
- Treat yourself on alcohol-free milestones. Spend the cash you're saving on drink for something nice for *you*. After one year I bought a ticket to see Pink in concert and some expensive shoes. At 700 days, I went for afternoon tea at The Savoy.
- Keep a "brag book". I'm not a journaling kind of person, but writing down three things every day I'm proud of helps you keep a glass-half-full (excuse the pun) optimistic attitude.

As told to Susanna Galton