

m+ I so loved being a mum that when my boys no longer needed me I turned to drink to fill the gap. It almost cost me my family, writes ANNETTE GILL

☒ Site ☐ Web Enter your search  Search



Follow

@DailyMailFashionFinderUK

By [ANNETTE GILL](#)

PUBLISHED: 01:47 GMT, 27 December 2024 | UPDATED: 02:19 GMT, 27 December 2024

As we put the finishing touches to the food and decorations for my son's 18th birthday celebrations, he had just one request.

'Mum, please don't drink today,' Matthew pleaded.

I was too ashamed to ask him why. Because I might embarrass him? Or maybe he just wanted me to be fully present for once?

It might not sound like a big ask on his special day. However, at the time, I was incapable of honouring it. Though I did make one small concession; I drank wine from a mug, pretending that it contained tea.

Although I don't **recall** a great deal about the day, I'm sure nobody was fooled. There would have been the tell-tale signs of Pinot Grigio pumping through my veins – slurred words, over-exuberance and flushed cheeks, followed by passing out on the sofa.

In fact, the following morning Matthew was so upset he told his dad, my husband Colin, he would move out of the family home if I didn't quit drinking.

Four years on from that day, I've not been brave enough to ask either of them exactly what I did at the party – I'm not sure I can handle the details.

But the irony that it was my drinking that nearly drove my son out of the house is not lost on me. For the reason I'd started drinking heavily a few years earlier was a loss of identity because my children were growing up and didn't need me any more.



Annette Bening started drinking heavily because her children were growing up and didn't need her any more

The ultimate fear, of course, was an empty nest. Now I'd almost brought about what I dreaded most.

Although I'd always 'liked a drink' – socialising in my 20s, while working in a corporate role in the City – I hadn't ever felt the need for one simply to get through the day.

My slide into dependency began in September 2017, when my younger son Harrison, then 11, started secondary school. Until then, my daily life had revolved around him and Matthew, who is four years older.

Some mums complain about the early years – the never-ending demands for snacks and being woken at dawn – but I loved being the centre of my sons' universe, the only person who could make it all better when they fell over in the park or lost a favourite toy.

Even after they both started primary school, I worked just a few hours a week, doing the accounts for my husband's logistics company, so I could be there for every drop-off and pick-up, as well as taking them to all their extra-curricular classes and Cubs' meetings.

I enjoyed that time with my boys and, equally, loved hanging out with all the other school mums.

My social life revolved around chatting at the school gates, or at the side of a muddy football pitch, as well as going for coffee after drop-off, or a few glasses of Prosecco in the evenings.

So there were lots of tears following the Year Six leavers' assembly in 2017. It was the end of an era.

From now on Harrison, like his older brother, would make his own way to school, the start of being independent. Both were also now at the age when they preferred playing on their Xbox to hanging out with me at home. My ready-made social life was also gone.

I'm acutely aware of my good fortune – we live in a five-bedroom house in an affluent village near Billericay, Essex. But regardless of how lucky I was, I felt I'd lost my purpose.

I'll never forget waving both my boys off, tearfully, at 8am to catch the school bus on Harrison's first day at 'big school' that September.

My only thought was: 'What on Earth am I going to do with myself for the next eight hours, until they come home?'

Before I would have been doing the school run, lingering afterwards to catch up with friends, or sometimes heading to a cafe for breakfast, before the gym. Now I had the whole, lonely day stretching ahead of me.

I've always loved working out so, for the first couple of hours of the day, I distracted myself with body pump and conditioning classes.

However, back home in the early afternoon, once the laundry was done and the dishwasher emptied, there was a hole in my life and I became increasingly down.

Though I upped my working hours a tad to compensate, I still did most of it from home, alone.

For the first few months I'd message friends, asking if they wanted to meet for a coffee or a walk.



Annette says she was getting through two bottles of wine a day, and two-and-a-half on her worst days



Annette says she always loved working out so for the first few hours of the day she would distract herself with Body Pump and conditioning classes

Come the spring, however, I spent afternoons sitting in my garden and it was there, enjoying the sunshine, that I first had the urge to pour myself a glass of wine.

'I don't need to drive again today – I'm not doing school pick-up – so I might as well,' I thought.

It was pleasurable, and felt quite daring, that first time.

However, over the coming months, it began to feel more like a need than a choice.

It's hard to describe what 'needing', instead of simply fancying, a drink feels like. The closest comparison I can make is when you have an itch and the only thing on your mind is scratching it. The more you try to ignore it, the more you're aware of it.

I had that same sensation about glugging a glass of wine. Having started a bottle in the afternoon, I'd polish it off while making dinner.

As I wasn't drinking it all in one go, I don't think I appeared drunk to my husband when he returned from work around 7pm. Consequently, it took a while for him to realise how reliant I was becoming.

I'd even use his homecoming as an excuse to open another bottle, offering him a glass with dinner and, by 9pm, I'd be asleep on the sofa.

My dependency took a turn for the worse when lockdown started in March 2020.

Without even the gym to kill some time, I was getting through two bottles of wine a day, two-and-a-half on my worst days.

Now working from home, Colin was much more conscious of my intake and would ask me not to drink. I'd promise I'd try.

He's not prone to anger, so we rarely rowed about it. Instead, he would simply leave the kitchen when I ignored his requests. We'd then spend the evening in separate rooms, which created a significant chasm in our relationship.

I'd tell him, and myself, that everyone was drinking. Imprisoned in our houses by the pandemic, booze was the only way we were all getting through.

But then I began to wake in the early hours, feeling so anxious and dehydrated it was difficult to get back to sleep.

After lying awake in bed until dawn, I found a 'solution'; I'd get up and go to the kitchen, where I'd drink a couple of glasses of wine until I'd feel sleepy again.

No matter how rough I felt, however, I always made sure I was up again – have showered and brushed my teeth, so no one could smell alcohol on my breath – to sort breakfasts for the boys, who were back at school following a period of homeschooling.

I still don't know when Matthew or Harrison first realised I had a problem. Mortifyingly, more than once, while searching for clean linen, I found wine bottles that Matthew had confiscated and hidden in the ottoman base of his bed.

I was vaguely aware of half-drunk bottles going missing – though it's hard to keep track when you're drinking more than the weekly recommended units in a single day. I realised he must have been pouring the rest away, before hiding the evidence under his bed.

Instead of asking him about it, I just put the empties in the recycling bin and opened another bottle so I could drink away the embarrassment.

But after the disastrous 18th birthday celebrations, and terrified that Matthew would move out, I was in no doubt I had a problem. I researched Alcoholics Anonymous and even attended some meetings.

Colin, my sister and my mum were all very supportive, but the AA message that I would always be an alcoholic and could never again be around booze just didn't resonate with me.

At the beginning of 2021, Colin tried a different strategy, giving up drinking himself to encourage me to follow suit. It didn't work.

Instead, it created an even greater distance between us.

Sometimes, when Colin and I went out together I'd offer to drive, to prove I could socialise without alcohol. However, I'd be desperate to get home at the end of the night so I could polish off a bottle of wine alone.

Other times, when we were invited to friends' houses for dinner, I'd drink so much I'd fall asleep. In fact, my party piece was nodding off on the loo. It says a lot about British drinking culture that nobody saw this as a problem and we'd all have a good laugh about it.

One concerned friend was courageous enough to tell me, by text afterwards, that she could smell alcohol on my breath when we met for coffee one afternoon. I ignored it and steered clear of her for a while.

Since I've been sober, others have told me about times they'd bump into me and it was obvious I was drunk. Although I don't recall most of these encounters, I knew that what I was doing was shameful, so isolated myself further from my friends.

Meanwhile, I was struggling to stay on top of the housework, we'd run out of food because I couldn't be bothered to go shopping and I'd started to make mistakes with the invoicing for Colin's company.



Annette says she gained two stone over four years from drinking, going from a size 8 to a 12

And the calories in all that wine really added up, even with trips to the gym. I gained two stone over four years, going from a size 8 to a 12. By November 2021, alcohol was affecting all aspects of my life. I was so sick and tired of feeling sick and tired that I knew I needed help. I even considered going to a rehab clinic, where a 28-day stay would cost £19,000.

When I told Colin, he took the view that while it might work for a month, once I was home and back in my everyday life, I'd drink again.

Then one weekend, while Colin was away, I came across Just The Tonic, an 11-week online coaching programme designed to help people understand why they drink and find more helpful coping strategies.

I remember sobbing down the phone to the founder Sandra, saying: 'I just can't do this any more. Alcohol is ruining my life.'

Although I didn't realise it at the time, I had my last drink the following day, a Sunday, and was completely sober when Colin returned on the Monday.

I told him that I'd arranged for us to speak to Sandra that afternoon and, by the end of the conversation, we'd agreed to enrol me on the programme.

It would cost a not inconsiderable amount of money. However, if it worked, it would be worth it.

I discovered that, like 90 per cent of problem drinkers, I wasn't physically addicted to alcohol, as I had no physical symptoms of withdrawal; mine were all emotional.

The bottom line was that I needed to face up to my feelings, without the numbing effects of booze. In my case, as well as mourning my children needing me less, I also had to confront a significant trauma I'd experienced ten years earlier.

I was home one evening when I got a call from my sister to say our dad had been hit by a car. By the time I got to the scene he had been pronounced dead. It was devastating.

My dad's killer, a hit-and-run driver, was given a four-year prison sentence and banned from driving for seven years. But my children were quite little at the time and I realised I hadn't allowed myself to properly grieve for Dad.

Alcohol had shielded me from the most difficult feelings and I needed to find new ways to self-soothe. Instead of a drink, I started to have long soaks in the bath, go for gentle walks and meet friends for coffee, cake and a good old catch-up.

Colin took over cooking dinner for a while, because the association between that and pouring a glass of wine was so strong.

My sobriety was put to the test very quickly. We already had an all-inclusive holiday in Barbados with a group of friends booked for the following January and made the decision not to cancel.

Being with 15 friends for a fortnight, all of whom were taking full advantage of the all-inclusive bar, while I drank mocktails, was the hardest thing I've ever done.

But it was also the best thing. I realised that if I could handle that, I could handle any situation without alcohol.

Now aged 48 and three years sober, I can honestly say I don't miss it at all. My life is infinitely better. My relationships, with both family and friends, are good. I'm happier, fitter, slimmer and my mind is sharper.

I've also recently qualified as a Just The Tonic coach, supporting other, mostly middle-aged women, like me, in changing their relationship with alcohol.

Most importantly, my children have never again had to beg me not to drink.

Matthew is now 22 and studying for a chartered accountancy qualification. Harrison, 18, is doing an apprenticeship in recruitment.

Like Colin, my sons are incredibly supportive and proud of me for quitting.

Since I've been sober, I've built relationships with them as adults. We love going out for dinner as a family and they ask my advice when choosing their clothes or gifts for their girlfriends.

Despite my fears about them growing up, I still feel needed by my boys, albeit in different ways than when they were little.

Currently, both are living at home and, although I can't say I'm looking forward to one day being an empty-nester, I feel confident now I'll survive it.

Book your
free
breakthrough
call with Just
the Tonic
here.

Certainly, I made sure that Matthew's 21st birthday last year was memorable for all the right reasons – not because his mum was stumbling around.

justthetoniccoaching.com/sober-coaching.

As told to Helen Carroll
