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I'm an NHS GP who had a drinking problem – and I'm far from alone

Surgeons would have a few to drink, get the call-in from the hospital, drive over and then operate on patients. I've seen it all



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Addiction, and even drinking on the job, isn't rare in admin staff, senior surgeons, paramedics, pharmacists and everyone in between

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If you've ever been to the doctor or into A&E then it's almost certain that you've been treated by an alcoholic. I would know. I've been [a GP for the NHS](#) for two decades, with an unblemished career, two children and a problem with

alcohol that took years to beat. Addiction, and even drinking on the job, isn't rare in admin staff, senior surgeons, paramedics, pharmacists and everyone in between.

The insane drinking culture that fosters and enables what I see in my colleagues starts all the way back in medical school. It's the same at any university: the minute we'd arrive, the older students would take us out and get us as drunk as possible. We were high achievers, always working hard and putting ourselves under pressure and then needing to blow off steam. So we were more crazy than your average students and everyone knew it. We'd have sayings like "I'd rather have a full bottle in front of me than a full frontal lobotomy," referring to brain surgeries that people with mental illnesses were given in hospitals decades ago.

That doesn't stop when you graduate and become a junior doctor. If anything, the drinking only ramps up. You all live together in your first year working at a hospital, and you're all still young, so when you get back to your shared accommodation in the evening you immediately pop open a drink – it's like freshers' week all over again. Consultants would invite us out for dinners that turned boozy, too, so we knew that our behaviour was seen as normal and acceptable.

When I did a rotation on surgery, it became obvious that for a lot of people, that lifestyle never changes. Surgeons who'd been on call at home would have a few to drink, get the call-in from the hospital, drive over and then operate on patients. I see that as shocking now, but it was never challenged. No wonder with what we saw, even as we were still training – people losing limbs, living in extreme pain and poverty and dying without family there to hold their hands.

Looking back, my own relationship with [alcohol](#) became difficult when I was studying for my finals at university. My friends and I would only drink at parties or when we were going out clubbing. I was too stressed to party but I leaned on alcohol to wind down and relax enough to get to sleep at night, buying beer and wine from the corner shop most nights and having a drink or two before bed.

As a junior doctor I was more stressed than ever before. I wasn't drinking alone then – everyone else was in the same boat. We were just so used to cracking out the lagers and talking about the awful things we'd seen on the

wards that day and how badly we were treated. The bonding and the social support was what got us through those tough first jobs, but we could've had it without the alcohol. We'd all [wake up hungover](#) but have to go into work anyway, which only made things worse. (Hungover doctors, of any age, aren't a rare sight on hospital wards.)

I stayed a heavy "social" drinker into my 40s. Alcohol was still what I used to relax and bond with people, including friends and my husband, Paul*, a City lawyer whose attitudes to alcohol were much the same as mine, given that he too had a high-pressure job and worked with stressed-out colleagues. I didn't see it as problematic to drink most evenings until we had our first child, in 2010. I realised that if my children had an accident I wouldn't be able to get them in the car and drive to A&E, and I knew from my job that in those cases where parents can't help, they get referred to social services. I'd never been drunk around my kids, just tipsy, but decided then to tone things down.

Until lockdown, that was. When the pandemic came my life well and truly fell apart. It became impossible to ignore the fact that my marriage to Paul wasn't working out – though we got on very well as adults, we were from very different cultural backgrounds and had totally different views on parenting. Before that we'd both been working long hours in the office through the week, with me often at work on a Saturday, too. Then all of a sudden, we were both working remotely, with me taking work calls and Zooms from my laptop and Paul speaking to his clients at his desk. Then there was homeschooling, another ground for arguments over what was right and wrong to teach our children.

There was no escape – except by drinking. I'd always thought that I'd been drinking to be social, for positive reasons, but when I look back it'd always been something I'd done to mask anxiety, whether it was exam stress or the fear of being the "odd one out". On the days when I worked, I'd be sober in the daytime, but from 5pm clock-off to 10pm each night I'd drink as much as I could. I never took a call with a patient after drinking, but I took countless work meetings from bed in my pyjamas, deathly hungover.

On days that I wasn't working, I was getting through two bottles of prosecco or champagne a day, maybe two and a half, and a few lagers on top of that – fun drinks, I told myself, to prove that I was still having fun. At my lowest I sourced a bottle of vodka and drank it like it was wine, making myself incredibly ill. By the end of lockdown, I'd need a drink just to get out of bed, after a night of really going heavy. I knew my doctor friends were doing the same: my colleagues with kids and I would text each other photos of our wine glasses or memes about needing to be drunk to handle homeschooling.

The more my marriage deteriorated, the more stressed I felt and the worse my drinking became. Paul and I would still have a couple of drinks together before dinner or after the kids had gone to bed, to try and patch things over, but when it got late we'd go to our separate bedrooms and have more to drink then, too, him on the lager and me on the wine. Paul ended up moving out before the last of the lockdowns were lifted. [Our divorce came through](#) two years ago.

I tried Alcoholics Anonymous briefly in 2021 and while it helped me for a bit, it didn't stick. The label of "alcoholic" just wasn't one that I could adopt without beating myself up and feeling like there was something badly wrong with me. I was a functioning mother, and a doctor working at a high level. Going to parties after lockdown and refusing drinks from friends under the guise of "recovery" didn't reflect how I really felt about my drinking problem – it's no wonder that people looked at my life, which was stable and comfortable despite my drinking, and told me that I didn't seem to have a problem at all.

Eventually I visited [Sandra Parker](#), an alcohol coach who takes a different view on people like me who function at a high level but have a difficult relationship with alcohol. It had always been obvious to me that there was a drinking problem in the medical world, but the true scale of it wasn't apparent, given that those struggling the most will work hardest to hide it. Sandra has worked with dozens of NHS staff: from doctors and GPs like me to dentists, speech therapists and even emergency workers in A&E.

Sandra began her practice at the height of lockdown, just as I was struggling, and says that things have only worsened since then. All of us doctors are still burnt out, the pressure that we come under has only increased, and we're still dealing with the way that lockdown wreaked havoc on our personal lives, too, just like everyone else. I'm far from the only one to have divorced after the pandemic.

As Sandra says, shame and secrecy can turn an unhealthy habit into a destructive problem like nothing else, and we doctors are often held to a much higher moral standard than everyone else. But all of us in Britain are raised with a huge amount of societal messaging that it's normal to drink to excess, to use alcohol to cope with stress or otherwise just to feel good, when our circumstances mean that it's normal – even healthy – for us to feel unhappy.

With Sandra's help, I've changed my relationship with alcohol from the roots up. First of all, I take the health risks that come with alcohol much more seriously now. Even as a doctor I wasn't fully aware of how damaging it is for your body to drink heavily as a habit, and understanding that has put me off the binges I used to use to cope. More importantly, though, Sandra has taught me how to cope with the different challenges that my job poses without turning to a substance. Whether it's [stress](#), anger, fatigue or even boredom, I know now how to handle each feeling in turn.

When I go to parties, with my colleagues or otherwise, there are times when I'll say yes to a drink. But since seeing Sandra, I haven't been drunk once. It might sound cliché but these days I'd rather do yoga or go swimming to get a sense of release.

I'm sure that people will be enraged to learn that the health service funded by their taxes is rife with alcohol abuse. But when that same service lets down all of its staff in every way, from pay and adequate time off to counselling and judgement-free support, of course we'll turn to Britain's favourite drug to manage the pain. If you ever overhear a doctor or a nurse joke that they'll "need a vodka" at the end of the shift, you'll know now that they mean it – and you'd be the same, too.

As told to Lauren Shirreff