

## 'After I retired, my drinking skyrocketed. Here's how I finally quit'

I was active, fully functional and had a successful career in finance but when I stopped working, alcohol became a problem



After the structure was removed from her day, Sarah Edwards, 69, found that she began drinking earlier Credit: Matt Writtle

Sarah Edwards

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I was already drunk when I arrived at the dinner party. I could tell I was slurring and I caught some of my husband's friends exchanging looks. Shame washed over me but I reached out for a glass of wine and knocked it back. And then another. I tried to join in the conversation, aware I was talking too loudly and stumbling over my words. I think I kept saying the wrong thing. There were more looks; more whispers – or maybe it was my imagination. I vaguely recall falling over on the way home before stumbling into bed.

The next day was tough. I had a hideous hangover and [there were large parts of the night I couldn't remember at all](#). My husband Johnnie wasn't happy: he was clearly embarrassed by me. [I had to face facts](#) – my drinking had become a problem.

My earliest memory of drinking is of sneaking some of my dad's homemade cider into boarding school and getting drunk, and very sick, at our harvest festival. My mum and stepdad drank quite heavily, every evening, and there were often arguments over dinner. I didn't drink that much growing up but it all changed when I moved to London. I was 24 and working in IT in the financial sector. It was a very male-oriented business environment and alcohol was de rigueur. We all drank at lunchtime and again after work: it was part of the team culture. We worked hard but played hard too.

I often worked with a hangover; nobody would dream of taking the day off. However, there were boundaries: I never drank in the office. We would go to bars after work and, once they closed, we'd often go clubbing. I didn't have an off button so any excuse to go on elsewhere was good for me! It was fun and we would never have done it without alcohol.

For the last 30 years of my working life, I worked as a project manager in a multinational finance corporation. I was mainly based in London but there were often work trips abroad – mainly to the USA, Singapore and Hong Kong. Expenses weren't really monitored so we ate and drank well, often staying up late and drinking at the hotel bar. You wouldn't have fitted in if you didn't drink. In fact, it never even occurred to me to cut down on drinking or that [my drinking was a problem](#). I would have been laughed out of the office if I'd opted for a soft drink.



'I didn't have an off button,' Sarah Edwards says of her previous lifestyle



I met Johnnie, when I was 24, in a bar. Our relationship was built around having fun and that always included alcohol. I didn't think about the health impacts at all. I was healthy, fit and active so why would I?

I retired when I was 62. I loved it at first, filling my time with art, tennis, golf, piano, bridge, French classes – everything I had always wanted to do. But [the structure had been removed](#), as had the boundaries, the scrutiny and the accountability. There were no longer 9am meetings to consider. I didn't have to worry about anyone smelling alcohol on my breath. I could start drinking earlier.

When I was working, [I'd drink a bottle of wine every evening](#). Once I retired, that swiftly escalated. Once I'd emptied that first bottle I'd often add a shot or two of vodka or gin, and occasionally I would open a second bottle of wine. It was becoming hard to get the hit I loved. The more you drink, the tougher it is to reach the old high.

Evenings were difficult, particularly in the winter. I'd start watching the clock from around 4pm. I had a rule that I wouldn't open the wine until 6pm but that soon slipped back to 5pm.

Johnnie had also retired but he wouldn't have his first drink until 6.30pm and some nights he didn't drink at all. We'd eat together but we slipped into watching TV in separate rooms. When he wasn't drinking he'd sometimes go up to bed early so I was on my own. The majority of evenings I wasn't even aware of being drunk.



'Our relationship was built around having fun and that always included alcohol': Sarah with her husband Johnnie on holiday in 2019

That dinner with Johnnie's friends was a major trigger. I saw myself through their eyes and it wasn't pretty. I might have thought I was the life and soul of the party but I'm sure I was actually the biggest bore. Things that are funny when you're young are just tedious in later life.

It was more than just embarrassment. I saw my 98-year-old mother ([a heavy drinker in her past](#)) with dementia and macular degeneration – she is almost blind. It's hereditary but drink certainly speeds up the process. I could see the risks. Routine blood tests from the GP showed high cholesterol, liver and kidney issues. [My drinking was affecting my health](#).

Cutting down wasn't going to be enough, I realised: I had to stop altogether. But it's hard when alcohol is such a major part of your life. I needed help.

I stumbled across sober coach [Sandra Parker](#) on social media. Her description of an active, fully functional person who drank too much was spot on for me. I joined her Just the Tonic programme and started one-to-one coaching with her, alongside listening to her online modules and joining group Zoom calls. I didn't go cold turkey on the booze at the start; [I just cut it down](#). Then, after about six weeks, I went onto the 30-day challenge of no alcohol at all.

There were many other retired professionals on the programme, some in their 70s and beyond. It was such a relief to realise I wasn't alone. Some were drinking more because they finally could. Others were bored after decades of purposeful work. Many were navigating loss or health scares. But we all had the same goal – to make the most of life without alcohol holding us back. That sense of shared purpose was a huge motivation – here were accomplished people who refused to let alcohol ruin their retirement.

The programme totally changed my mindset. You cannot give up anything with just self-control: it wanes and it doesn't last. I needed to see alcohol for the illusion it is. It's marketed so brilliantly as a party drink; as a confidence-boosting wonder liquid. It's not. It's highly addictive and dangerous and we all need to be aware of that and be warned of its consequences. We learnt the facts about what alcohol actually does to our brain and our body – sleep, health, looks. Sandra taught me not to blame myself – [it's not a personal weakness or faulty gene](#); it's the addictive nature of alcohol doing exactly what it's designed to do. She worked on changing the desire itself. Instead of reaching for that glass of wine I have learnt to ask: "What do I actually need right now?" Usually it's to feel relaxed, to feel rewarded or to connect. Then you find something that really delivers – without the 3am wake-up and morning regret.



'I'm so much happier, so much more relaxed without alcohol,' says Sarah Credit: Matt Writtle

I journal every day and post on the programme's WhatsApp group most days: the support from others is huge and the accountability really helps. I've now progressed into the follow-up programme, and still have coaching.

Within a couple of months of [giving up alcohol](#), my blood tests showed the difference – my liver, kidneys and cholesterol levels were all normal.

These days I wake up clear-headed at around 6am and journal and meditate. I exercise five times a week and my golf and tennis have improved – a nice bonus. I don't fear dinners or parties anymore – I remember every conversation and can drive home. I drink alcohol-free lager or prosecco when I'm out but I'm perfectly happy with water at home. My friends are supportive on the whole and any that aren't I just don't see so much. I would never want to be judgmental and wouldn't ever suggest anyone drink less – this alcohol-free route is purely for me.

[My family has definitely noticed a huge difference](#). I can't believe how much better my relationship with my husband is without alcohol. He's 100 per cent supportive and is drinking less himself. Our daughters (33 and 30) are delighted. They never spoke about my drinking but I knew they hated it. They always clocked when I'd had even one drink and would leave the kitchen when I was drinking. Now we all hang out together and chat. They're both so supportive and we have a much better, more present and open relationship.



I have so much more energy during the day now and I'm so much happier, so much more relaxed without alcohol. I've become someone who is simply not bothered about alcohol, rather than someone who's constantly resisting drinking: it's true freedom. I want to live my retirement, not exist in it. I am 70 this year – onto another chapter of my life. I intend to make it one of the best in so many ways.

### **These are the practices that I found really helpful:**

- Journal daily – it really helps. I also found listening to Sandra's modules incredibly motivating.
- Remind yourself that the first 20 minutes after drinking alcohol is the only time you actually feel good from it. After that you're chasing a feeling that's already gone. All those hours nursing a bottle of wine make no sense.
- Make sure you're accountable, whether that's within a group or with friends and/or family.
- Tell people what you're doing – you'll be amazed how supportive most will be.
- Be kind to yourself. This isn't about beating yourself up: it's a journey to a more pleasurable and healthy life.
- Indulge yourself with treats occasionally – jewellery, holidays, food treats, massage. Realising just how much money I was saving was a huge incentive for me.