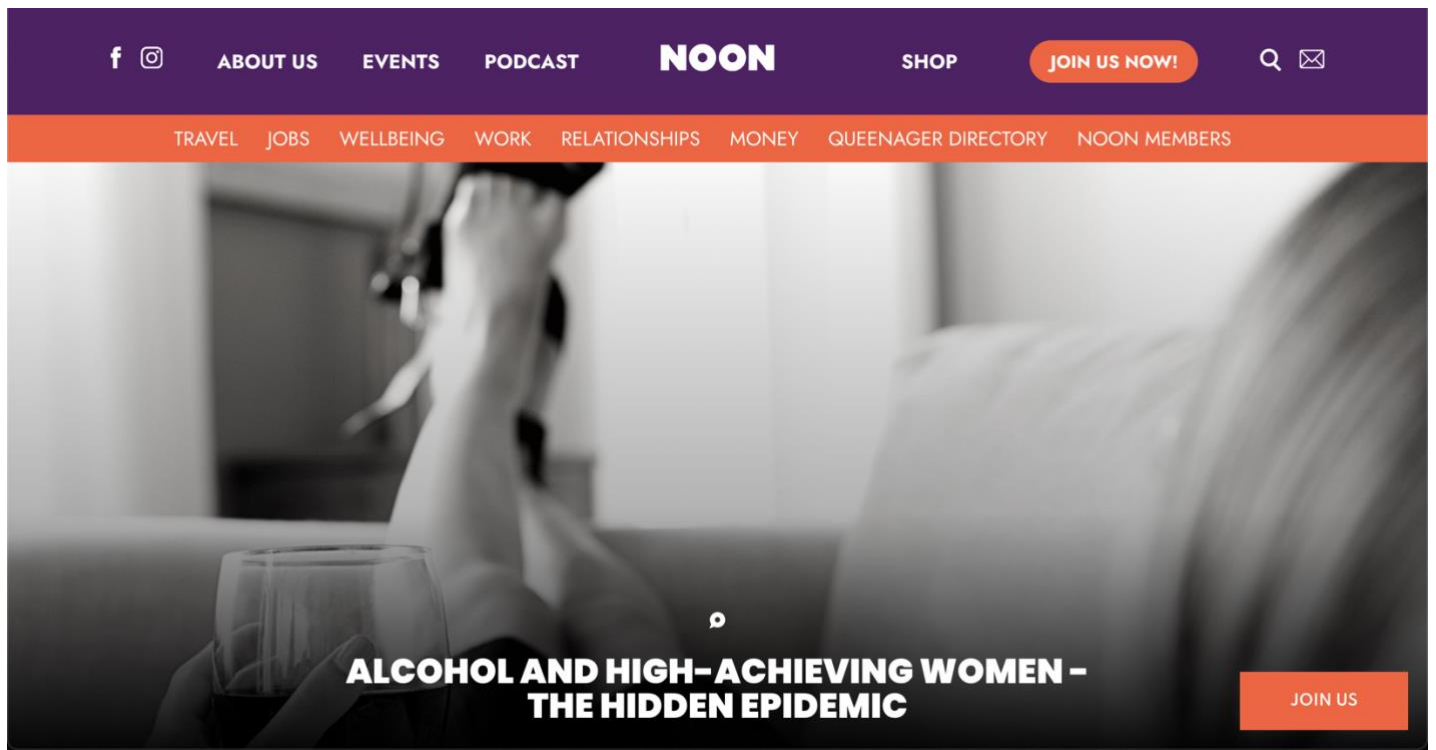




Changing her own life after decades of barely concealed alcohol abuse, led former chartered accountant, Sandra Parker, to realise she was far from alone in her struggle. And to a determination to help other women, and men, to take control over their alcohol consumption.

When you imagine a problem drinker you might think of someone propped up at a bar until the end of the night, or on a park bench drinking something wrapped in a brown paper bag. I'm pretty sure you wouldn't picture someone who's a high-performing professional, and that it's even less likely that the person that comes to mind is a woman.

And yet statistics show there are a growing number of successful, professional women aged 40 and over who are drinking to excess on a regular basis (a 2022 NHS survey showed that the proportions of women who usually drank more than 14 units a week is significantly highest from ages 45 – 64) – mainly drinking wine at home and consuming, on average, a bottle every night, up to as much as 14 bottles a week. These are high-functioning women who are competent in their careers, always pushing themselves to make sure they are performing at the level required of them at work and keeping all the balls in the air in their personal and family lives.



How alcohol dependency starts

On the basis of my experience – both personal and through the work I now do as an drink management coach – these women are using alcohol as a stress relief at the end of the day, a way to take the edge off and be able to temporarily numb themselves from the stresses of work, family, relationship issues, loneliness and as a substitute for having time to relax. The drinking then becomes a compelling learned behaviour, leading to dependency.

The pandemic exacerbated this problem in a number of different ways. Firstly, because stress levels increased with the challenges of supervising schoolwork, family obligations, financial stress for some, isolation for others and with no external outlet for respite.

In addition, the change in everyone's circumstances meant it was acceptable and expected to drink at home. Alcohol was seen as an adult treat to help people cope with the additional stress and off licences were designated as essential businesses by the UK Government and therefore able to remain open throughout all the lockdowns. Alcohol was also more readily available via home delivery and many people who had previously refrained from drinking during the week found themselves drinking every night.

Losing the normal guardrails

The shift to home working made it even easier to consume more alcohol. Without the need to drive to work, or to be in the office, or even see colleagues on camera, the normal guardrails that stopped people from drinking excessively during the working week had come off.

People who had never drunk at home found it harder to stop at a glass and were able to hide the extent of their drinking – they didn't have to worry about appearing drunk in public, how to get home, or judgement from colleagues in the office the following day.

Over time this almost inevitably catches up with them – it could be their partner complaining about their drinking, performance issues at work, a health scare, a comment from their children, or becoming isolated because of alcohol.

Support is sketchy at best

When these women get to this stage, there's precious little support available. AA tends not to be an option because of the stigma, the need for secrecy – this is a cohort who are adept at keeping the level of their drinking hidden – and the association with acute heavy drinkers, which they don't see themselves as.

NHS support is very patchy. A lot of the women I speak to haven't seen their GP since before Covid because of the difficulties of getting an appointment, and the ones that do, tend to underplay how much they drink due to shame, fear of having it on their records or fear of being told to stop. For the minority who are honest, their GP either tells them they are not bad enough for rehab (rehab referrals tend to be available only for people at the very acute stage of alcohol addiction), advises them to cut down with no guidance on how, or puts them in touch with a local support group which offers not much more than a phone call once a month for three months.

My own story

Much of this I know from my own experience, having been a binge drinker from my teens to my forties. I suffered from anxiety as a teenager and panic attacks as a student. Alcohol helped me to switch off my anxiety when I was socialising and I grew to love the fuzzy-headed feeling I got when I was drinking. I never intended to get drunk and whilst I *could* go out without getting drunk, every so often I would unintentionally drink way more than I planned and suffered for days, sometimes weeks afterwards

Up until my forties I considered that to be normal behaviour and the price to pay for enjoying alcohol. I couldn't imagine a life without alcohol and pitied non-drinkers. I didn't drink every night but I did drink at every social occasion, and on Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday and bank holidays. I drank on every flight, every long train journey, every day on holiday, at the cinema, at my gym and at my running club. I drank on every holiday,

including every night for a year when I went travelling and even snuck wine into a dry yoga retreat, thinking that was completely normal.

Every so often I would get drunk, sometimes to the point of blacking out and would suffer from crippling anxiety for days afterwards. In my twenties, I would get horrendous hangovers – sometimes being physically sick all day. I have missed flights, lost my phone, my shoes, contact lenses, passport, money and keys. I would wake up hating myself and worry about how drunk I had been, whether other people were as drunk as me and try desperately to laugh it off.

And yet, all this time I had a high-powered, highly-paid job as a chartered accountant based in Canary Wharf.

When I finally accepted I had a problem

It took me until I reached my forties to finally accept I had a problem. I grew increasingly afraid of the hold that alcohol had over me, so I started looking for a solution. I wanted to be healthier, sharper and feel better about myself. My anxiety had become worse and I had grown to dread how low I felt after I drank too much. I wasn't interested in quitting alcohol altogether, so I looked for a solution to help me moderate my consumption.

Over the years I tried all manner of drink-reduction techniques including 'Dry January', drink apps and having water between drinks, but none of them worked. Things only started to finally shift through a combination of executive career coaching, which helped me build my confidence and understand more about emotional intelligence, the importance of recognising my emotions, and what to do to navigate the challenges I faced in the workplace, including my own anxiety, and amazing life coaching.

The life coaching allowed me to realise that my anxiety was caused by a pattern of catastrophising which I *could* take control over. Through group coaching programmes I learned about the power of accountability and how liberating it was to share challenges and realise I wasn't the only person with insecurities using alcohol, or other avoidance methods, to numb out. I had always thought of alcohol as a harmless indulgence which I just needed to exercise more control over, but as I educated myself more, and with the help of all the coaching, I realised that the issue wasn't me. That alcohol is a highly addictive drug and how one drink creates a craving for another.

Pausing then stopping

Eventually I was so sick of how miserable I felt after drinking I knew I needed a proper break, so I stopped drinking for a month. Because I was doing so much mindset work and coaching around the emotions I'd been using alcohol to avoid, I started to realise I could handle my them and I didn't need to numb them out. That felt amazing, and I wanted to hang on to that, so I extended the break to six months and slowly realised I didn't want to drink again. I felt I'd got my spark back, I was calmer. I liked myself more, felt sharper and less riddled with doubt. I felt I could achieve more professionally, have better friendships and reach new levels of fitness. It was as if I was navigating life with a secret superpower. I was not drinking, and it felt really good!

Feeling compelled to do something different

I also felt genuinely shocked about how good not drinking made me feel, I wanted everyone else to feel the same and so I encouraged other people to give up alcohol as well. But whilst people were generally complimentary to me about what I'd done, no-one seemed interested in joining me. A couple of things happened that led me to create my business. First the newfound clarity I had meant it was increasingly obvious I needed to change career. I didn't hate my job, there were plenty of aspects about it I enjoyed, but I felt compelled to do something different.

I had considered becoming a life coach for years but was worried about losing the security of my well-paid corporate job so I did a part-time life coaching course and another course on alcohol, whilst still working. Discovering that not drinking could make you happier rather than more miserable was life-changing for me, and I felt excited about how I could help other people achieve the same.

My own experience and what I've learnt on the courses I've done, led me to decide to create a business offering coaching to high-achieving individuals to help them gain control over alcohol. Since setting up Just The Tonic Coaching I've been privileged to have supported hundreds of men and women to take long-term control over alcohol and improve their lives in so many ways.

My advice for women struggling with alcohol abuse:

Don't beat yourself up for becoming addicted. Alcohol is a highly addictive drug. See it for what it is and know that you are neither weak or flawed.

Write down exactly how much you are drinking over a week.

Try to take a complete break for 30 days. If you aren't able to do that, or if even the idea sounds too difficult, you need expert help. I recommend a solution with individual support to identify the causes of your drinking. This is necessary if you want to free yourself from the need to drink without feeling deprived.

If you suspect a woman you know is struggling with alcohol abuse:

Tread carefully. Be ready to help and offer to listen but accept that ultimately people will only take action if they want to.

Choose a time to have a conversation when you can talk uninterrupted. Put any judgements you might have to one side and listen empathetically.

Understanding that someone who has a problem with alcohol is likely to be struggling with an issue of some sort or going through a difficult time, allows you to focus on asking them how they are and offering support/comfort to help them with the underlying issue. This is an important and supportive way to help them, especially if they're not yet ready to discuss their drinking.

Find out about Sandra's alcohol coaching services on her website [Just The Tonic Coaching](#).

By Sandra Parker