

# I've drunk too much for half my life and humiliated myself. My self-delusion was so powerful. Now at 73 I'm finally sober and it only took a month. Here's how I did it... and how to escape the cycle, by MARGARET DUNNE

By MARGARET DUNNE

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Waking, thirsty and groggy, the morning after a friend's leaving do, I noticed that my precious baguette cut diamond ring was missing from my finger.

Having little recollection of the previous night, I messaged her to ask if she'd picked it up.

Even now her response makes me cringe from head to toe.

'No, but you were very drunk. Two bouncers carried you out.'

Despite being in my early 60s at the time, I'd drunk two bottles of wine at the pub and couldn't remember this shockingly undignified exit, nor how I'd got home.

In an effort to cover my shame, I made my usual excuse that I'd fallen over because of my hemidystonia – a neurological disorder I'd been diagnosed with in my early 40s.

Hemidystonia causes slurred speech and stumbling, involuntary muscle contractions and tremors and – although undoubtedly debilitating – it also provided a ready explanation for my drunken exploits.

For 30 years I used the condition to mask the extent of my drinking problems from my friends and family.

Yet, now 73 and six months sober, I can see I was lying to myself as much as to anyone else.

Despite instances such as that leaving do offering clear evidence that I had a major drinking problem, I didn't think I could possibly be an alcoholic.

Why not? Because I never drank during the day; I only opened a bottle of wine after I'd eaten supper and washed up.

For 30 years I used my brain condition to mask the extent of my drinking problems from my friends and family, writes Margaret Dunne

Margaret, who is now 73 and six months sober, said that she drank at least a bottle and a half of wine every night for 12 years

And I was part of a wine club, too. Yes, up to 20 bottles of red and white were delivered to my door every month – I'd stock up at the supermarket between times – but that's because I was a 'connoisseur', rather than a drunkard.

It all sounded good in theory. But for 12 years, I'd polish off at least a bottle and a half every night.

I would enjoy an evening out with friends most weeks too, and if they were sceptical when I claimed my slurred speech was down to my condition, I was too drunk to care.

The sad truth is I've drunk more than I should for nearly half a century.

In my twenties, I'd have 'liquid lunches' with colleagues in my office job before going for 'a couple of drinks' after work, which always turned into more.

Even having my daughter, Helen, when I was 32 didn't stop me, as my parents would pick her up from school, giving me a couple of hours to 'socialise' with colleagues.

Helen's father, Chris, and I separated in 2000 when she was 15 – ironically because he had a drink problem. Growing up Helen never saw me drunk because, wanting to limit Chris's access to booze, I never drank at home. He developed cirrhosis and sadly died, aged just 61, in 2019.

The first signs of my neurological condition came around 30 years ago, when I began getting double vision.

Then I noticed my left foot dropping, like it was out of my control, and cramping, with pins and needles. I also experienced spasms down my left side and my speech was sometimes slurred.

At first, the doctors thought I had multiple sclerosis but eventually I was diagnosed with hemidystonia, a condition that is caused by a problem with the part of the brain that controls movement. While for some people this can be genetic, or the result of a stroke, often – as in my case – it is not known why it develops.

I was prescribed muscle relaxants and an anti-depressant for nerve pain. Mostly the medication held the symptoms in check, and I never had any problems when I was sober.

After my mum died in 1992, my father moved in with me and Helen so that he wasn't alone.

But in 2012 – by which time Helen was married and shortly to become a mother of two – he died of lung cancer.

It was then that my drinking spiralled out of control.

I was 60, single and retired from my job as an IT trainer specialising in financial systems at Newcastle University. Without my family and the routine of work, I felt sad and lonely.

Come 8.20pm every evening I'd open a bottle of wine. My favourite tittle was shiraz – though I wasn't so fussy come the second bottle.

Alcohol helped me relax, switching off my otherwise overactive anxious mind.

In the short term, that is, because the hangxiety would be crippling the following day, especially on the many mornings I woke with cuts and bruises.

I'd make my way to bed each night at 1.30am but so many times I'd trip up the stairs and even, on occasion, fall back down.

Self-delusion is a powerful thing and I'd convince myself that I'd lost my balance because of my illness, not because of the 14 units – the maximum you should drink in a week – I'd consumed that night.

When friends and relatives commented on my cuts and bruises, I'd tell them the same thing and try not to feel guilty when they smiled sympathetically.

While I'm lucky my injuries were not worse, about eight years ago I did break my ankle in a drunken fall.

I was so ashamed that I limped around on it for three weeks, before finally going to hospital where it was put in a cast.

Of course, when the medical staff asked how it had happened I told them about the hemidystonia, not mentioning I'd been drunk.

Sandra Parker, who runs teetotal coaching scheme Just The Tonic, encouraged Margaret to take on a 30-day sober challenge following ten weeks of coaching

And when asked a routine question about how much I drank, I lied and said about 14 units a week. The truth was more like 100.

Another time I arrived home after an evening out with friends and, as I was letting myself into the house, must have fallen backwards on to the path, knocking myself unconscious.

Mercifully, I came round after about an hour unharmed but very confused and with a huge lump on the back of my head.

The following day, I told the friends I'd been with that muscle tremors must have caused the fall.

I remember one of them laughing: 'Yes, nothing to do with the five bottles of wine the three of us shared.'

You see, I wasn't the only big drinker in my social circle; heavy drinking among 'respectable' women in their sixties and seventies – the baby boomer generation – is more common than many realise.

Recent analysis by the Institute of Alcohol Studies suggests 55 to 74-year-olds are now the heaviest-drinking age group – and trends have shown deaths from alcohol are rising most sharply for women.

But even being aware of the huge risks I was taking was not enough to stop me drinking.

I was scared I'd no longer be able to 'enjoy' my life without booze and that friends would find me 'dull'.

It was a holiday in Ibiza with Helen and her family last May that finally made me see sense.

I remember calling friends from my room, telling them I felt judged by my daughter and son-in-law for drinking during the day.

They said all the 'right' things; 'it's an all-inclusive holiday, you'd be mad not to' and 'spoilsports!'

But early one afternoon, one of my granddaughters asked for a sip of my 'slushie' and I had to admit it contained gin, even though I'd previously insisted it was alcohol-free.

The embarrassment of having to admit to my nine-year-old granddaughter that grandma's drink had 'wobbly juice' in it, so she couldn't try it, was something of an epiphany.

I knew I had to do something about my drinking, but I had no idea what.

I was scared of quitting completely, fearing the loss of my social life and lonely evenings stretching ahead of me.

I tried cutting back, but that proved impossible. Once I opened a bottle, I lost all resolve to stop again.

But my relationship with alcohol was constantly on my mind and two months later, searching for solutions on the internet, I came across

Just The Tonic, a sober coaching programme designed to help people explore the reasons we drink and draw on support from others to stop.

Its members are all high achievers – from barristers to doctors – who have developed an unhealthy relationship with alcohol, leading to a psychological dependency on it.

Sandra Parker, who runs the programme, said there was no pressure for me to stop drinking immediately, but that after around ten weeks of coaching I'd be asked to do a 30-day sober challenge.

I joined on August 11, and by the end of that month I'd stopped drinking.

With coaching I'd realised I drank to quell my feelings of loneliness and social anxiety, something I realised I'd been plagued with all my life.

Finally I also understood the negative impact it was having on my life – that I was putting myself in danger and risking the relationships with those I loved most.

I haven't touched a drop of alcohol since.

I didn't have any physical withdrawal; my biggest challenge was imagining evenings out without wine.

However, that proved much easier than I thought and I'm now very happy to join friends at the pub, knowing I'll stay sober and can drive home whenever I'm ready to leave.

To my surprise they've been very supportive, interested in my newfound sobriety and just as happy having me join them on evenings out as before.

Although I still have hemidystonia – it's a lifelong condition – I haven't so much as stumbled since giving up drinking.

And I haven't mislaid any precious jewellery either.

I count my blessings that I didn't kill myself with booze. While I still bear the scars, both mental and physical, things could have been so much worse.

- [justthetoniccoaching.com](http://justthetoniccoaching.com)
- As told to Helen Carroll

