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After I was made redundant I started drinking three bottles of wine a night

Losing my £200,000-a-year job at 66 left me without purpose, routine or identity – until a brilliant coach helped me recover and get sober

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Graham Walters photographed for The Telegraph at home in Buckinghamshire Credit: John Lawrence

As soon as the email landed that Monday morning, I knew what was coming. I'd been asked to attend a meeting with the chief operating officer, the chief executive officer and someone from [HR](#), so I knew the paperwork was being prepared. I'd been on the other side of the table many times.

Sure enough, in a meeting that lasted less than an hour, I was made redundant. After more than four decades in the oil and gas industry, working my way up from a young engineer to running the company, I was told my job no longer existed. The business had changed, they explained. At 66, my role, years of experience and passion for the industry were no longer of any use.

It was January 2023, and my career was over. I walked out into the cold feeling numb and then, randomly, bought a packet of cigarettes. I didn't even smoke. Never had. I just needed something while I sat on a park bench, thinking: "What now?" I hadn't planned to retire until I was 70, so it came as a complete shock.

Then I went home to tell my wife. Jill and I have been married for more than 40 years. She's been there through everything. As I walked through the door, her face briefly lit up. "You're home early," she said, smiling, more used to seeing me back at 8pm.

“I don’t have a job any more,” I said.

Saying it a out loud felt strange. Jill made all the right noises, but breaking the news to my wife that I’d been made redundant was, in many ways, harder than being told myself.

The lucky life of a boomer

Looking back, I can see my life had followed a typical path for someone of my generation. I met Jill at Leeds University in the late 1970s. I’d studied mining engineering; she was an English literature student. We instantly hit it off, with her telling a friend: “That’s the man I’m going to marry.”

Luckily, she was right – we married at 25. People say that’s young, but back then there was less navel-gazing; people just got on with life. We bought our first terraced house in Watford and, not long after, my job took us to Aberdeen. I was working as a drilling engineer in the North Sea, spending two weeks offshore at a time.



Graham and Jill met at Leeds University in the late 1970s and married at 25

It wasn't easy on the marriage. I was either at home for two weeks solid, getting under her feet, or not there at all. Jill gave up working in HR to raise our two children, now in their 40s, but later became a university lecturer.

As my career progressed steadily, we moved back to England (I'd grown up on the Wirral, while Jill was from Norfolk) and I took on more responsibility, climbing through the ranks. I was always very driven. Eventually, I became managing director of a UK oil and gas company, earning more than £200,000 a year. We had a nice home in Buckinghamshire and life was good.

The job came with pressure, though, especially the higher I climbed. At one stage, I found myself the sole director of a company carrying \$1.2bn in debt. Our US parent company had gone bankrupt, and we were left trying to hold things together in the UK. I was dealing with lawyers, restructuring experts and creditors all over the world. It was relentless.

That's when I first turned to booze, working long days and having to grapple with high-stakes legal and financial decisions, unlike the more technical work I'd done earlier in my career. Alcohol was often part of working life, as negotiations frequently took place over dinners and drinks with clients.

Then it [became a bottle of wine after a long day to help me unwind](#). But I was still functioning, and still in control. That only changed later.



Long hours and high-pressure decisions saw Graham increasingly rely on alcohol to unwind after work

[I'd never planned my retirement](#). Truthfully, I didn't want to retire at all. I had so much energy and had been too busy with work to develop any hobbies. I wasn't ready for the scrapheap. Pipe and slippers? No thanks.

While I know I'm fortunate that my finances were not in disastrous shape, the loss of identity, status and purpose stung. And because of the terms of my redundancy package, I wasn't allowed to speak to former colleagues. My team had become friends. Work had been my life as well as my social life, so that was isolating.

I tried consultancy, but was rejected multiple times. After a lifetime of work, I missed the routine and the meetings. My phone was silent. Jill would go off to see friends, rightly enjoying her retirement. "Come with me," she'd urge. But I felt empty. My ego had taken a hit. I'd half-heartedly go to my gym for a workout, but usually only made it as far as the sauna.

Waking at dawn with a racing heart

I'd become used to drinking with colleagues, but soon after I lost my job I began drinking alone. I had a rule never to drink during the day, but once the *News at Six* came on TV, I'd crack open a cheeky beer or two, then think: "Why not open a bottle of wine?" It's amazing how quickly things spiralled without any routine.

By March 2023, I was drinking up to 200 units a week – beer, wine, spirits, whatever was there, really. That's roughly the equivalent of drinking three bottles of wine a night. I knew the NHS recommends no more than 14 units a week and, at 66, I was painfully aware that this came with considerable health risks. Jill usually went to bed earlier, so I don't think she realised how often I stayed up alone drinking.

Luckily, I never had any reason to visit a [doctor at that time, or I might have lied about my shocking intake](#). Jill noticed my energy levels drop but, to her credit, never wagged her finger at me. When she found me asleep on the sofa, she would just say: "Again?" I'd wake at dawn with a racing heart, wracked with anxiety as the alcohol left my system, then do it all again the next day. I had no drive for life.



Graham had always prided himself on his drive and energy, but he lost both in the wake of his redundancy

In February 2024, things came to an ugly head one Sunday during a weekend away with Jill in London. It started with beers while watching Liverpool win the Carabao Cup final in the hotel bar, then a trip to The Comedy Store with friends, followed by more drinks after Jill had gone to bed. I ended up stumbling down the hotel steps and fracturing a rib.

[I could feel Jill's silent disappointment.](#) She needed me the next day to help our daughter move house and there I was, useless and unable to lift anything. That was a wake-up call. After everything I'd built over decades for the family, I was letting them down. I had to change.

I decided to get help – funnily enough – after [reading in *The Telegraph* about a woman who had used a sober coaching programme](#) called Just the Tonic. It wasn't an easy step. I'm not someone who asks for help, but I joined in September 2024 and it gave me something I'd lost: structure. And support – people who understood what I was going through. Some had even been made redundant like me. We met online and also had a WhatsApp group.

Finding purpose again

I continued drinking throughout the seven weeks of the course, cutting down from hundreds of units to closer to 10 a week. Then I was encouraged by the coaching programme to record myself on a final night of drinking, so I drank two bottles of white wine.

Any time I felt tempted to drink, I watched the awful video of myself. I could see how I started slurring my words, talking in circles and, frankly, looking dreadful. That was a good deterrent, but there were also modules on building self-esteem and finding purpose again.

The early days were difficult; you're breaking habits that have built up over years. Before that, the last time I'd gone 45 days without alcohol was in 1981, when I was working on an oil rig in the desert in Kuwait, a dry country. But after the first week of the challenge, I felt physically better. After two weeks, I was mentally clearer and had some of my old drive back.

I allowed myself a couple of drinks at Christmas, but mostly that was to test myself. I decided I preferred life without booze. People were supportive. By the time you get to my age, friends have their own reasons for cutting down too, and many were happy to join me in ordering a zero-alcohol Guinness.

Today, aged 69, I'm making the most of not working. I've just been to the Giant's Causeway with Jill – she'd been trying to get me there since our fifties, but work always got in the way.



At 69, Graham now prefers life without alcohol

I feel so much more positive about life. Instead of feeling worthless, I see retirement as an opportunity to devote more time to the family – taking the grandchildren to Hampton Court Palace or collecting fossils on the beach.

People sometimes ask whether I miss drinking. The honest answer is no. If it were my last day on Earth, I wouldn't drink now because I'd want to remember every second. Life is better without it.

People also ask whether I miss work – and that's harder to answer. I do, and it hurts like hell being laid off. But having a more positive mindset makes a difference. I realise now that life is so good. And this time, it doesn't depend on a job title.

As told to Susanna Galton