

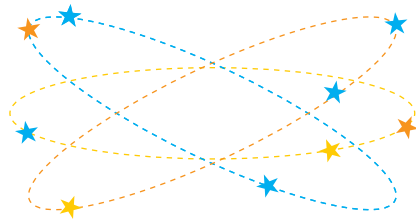


DRINK

RETHINK

HOW ONE WOMAN'S
21-DAY NO-BOOZE
FACEBOOK CHALLENGE PUT
THE BRAKES ON A
HABIT THAT WAS VEERING INTO
THE DANGER ZONE

BY ANNE BOKMA



IT WAS THE BLACKOUT THAT DID IT.

Two full hours lost, never to be retrieved from my memory bank again. It was last summer, and I was at a campground with friends. After a raucous evening, during which both the wine and the conversation were flowing abundantly, I woke up with a hangover and couldn't recall how I had gotten back to my campsite, which was some distance away from the others. When I discovered that a friend had escorted me to my tent, I asked her if I'd done or said anything stupid the night before. Apparently not.

But I did retell – over and over – a story my husband had shared with me on the phone earlier that day about his flight home from Cuba. The crew didn't speak English and the pilot, circling the airport for hours during a rough storm, didn't offer any words of consolation to the extremely agitated passengers beyond "Good luck!" Apparently, I found this indescribably funny – so much so that I told this same story four (yes, four) times, taking particular relish in pronouncing the words "Good luck!" with a Spanish accent. And I was loud. "I think the whole campground heard you," my friend said with a laugh. She was smiling, but I was mortified. Try as I might, I couldn't remember any of this. The amnesia was temporary, but it signalled that it was time for a permanent change.

I'd always thought a blackout was the same as passing out, but it isn't. In the physiology of blackouts, you appear to be functioning normally, but as your blood alcohol level spikes, it shuts down the hippocampus, wiping out your long-term memory in the process.

It wasn't exactly a lost weekend, but it was two hours I'll never get back. It scared me enough to take action. When I got home, I hammered out a Facebook post saying that I was starting a 21-day no-booze challenge and invited others to join a private online group where we could share articles, updates and encouragement as we cut out alcohol for three weeks. Three weeks – how hard could it be? To my surprise, more than 40 people signed on. Like me, most of them were in midlife. Many said they drank more than they wanted to.

Until that blackout, I didn't think I had a problem with alcohol – not a big one anyway. Sure, I seemed to

drink more than most of my friends, and I woke up a couple of times a week with a low-grade headache because of imbibing the night before. But I never threw up, passed out or missed work because of it – wine was simply my way to unwind.

I began drinking almost daily about 10 years ago, when my kids were young and I needed a reward after a long day at the office and a second shift of toddler time at home. Come 9 p.m., the shiraz would be swirling merrily in my glass.

In her book *Drink: The Intimate Relationship Between Women and Alcohol*, Canadian journalist Ann Dowsett Johnston recounts her struggles with alcohol and her ensuing recovery jump-started by a stay at a treatment centre. She argues that booze has become "the mother's helper of her generation," replacing the tranquilizers that millions of housebound women were addicted to in the '60s. "Alcohol is ubiquitous in our society," she says. "It's hugely linked to our notions of celebration, sophistication and well-being. It's how we relax, reward, escape, exhale."

Home life became less demanding when my kids got older, but by then I had started a business as a freelance writer and managed constant deadlines. When I shut down my laptop at the end of the day, wine was still my reward. Same went for my husband, a newspaper columnist who juggles three deadlines a week. The satisfying sound of a cork popping and the glug-glug of wine pouring into a wide-brimmed goblet released the pressure valve for both of us. We could easily polish off a bottle of wine on most nights and often opened a second. I never counted, but I knew I was well over the low-risk drinking guidelines recommended by Canadian health agencies (no more than two drinks a day on most days to a maximum of 10 drinks a week for women and no more than three drinks a day on most days to a maximum of 15 drinks a week for men).

I had entered the drinking danger zone – and I wasn't alone. Studies show that one in five Canadians exceeds these low-risk drinking guidelines, and there's probably a lot more of us than that. A study by the Centre for Addictions Research of BC at the University of Victoria found that Canadians underesti-

mate their alcohol consumption by up to 75 percent.

Women are drinking more now than ever. A 2010 Gallup poll reports that nearly two-thirds of American women drink “regularly,” a number higher than at any time in the past 25 years. We drink at all stages of our lives – from the sorority sisterhood days of university to the after-work drink rituals of our 20s to the time-starved, sleep deprived mommy-needs-a-martini years of early parenting – and it doesn’t stop there.

Drinking is progressive and, for some, it can escalate in midlife, says *Best Health* columnist Dr. Vivien Brown, a Toronto family physician and president of the Federation of Medical Women of Canada. “Women often drink when they are lonely, after the kids leave home or after a separation or divorce,” she says. She has female patients in their 70s who have “a sherry in the late afternoon, followed by a couple of glasses of wine at dinner and a hot toddy before bed.” That’s 28 drinks a week, more than double the recommended guidelines. Why do they do it? “When women feel vulnerable, they may think alcohol is a safe thing to turn to,” says Dr. Brown. “To some women, drinking at home seems acceptable and safer than taking drugs or going to bars.”

Studies show that unresolved trauma, depression or anxiety is at the root of why the majority of women drink too much. “Alcohol is the anaesthesia by which we endure the operation of life,” wrote the playwright George Bernard Shaw. Certainly there’s no shortage of bestselling “quit lit” books by women who document their descent into drinking as a way to seek oblivion from a painful past, including Caroline Knapp’s *Drinking: A Love Story*, Jowita Bydlowska’s *Drunk Mom: A Memoir*, Sarah Hepola’s *Blackout* and Mary Karr’s *Lit: A Memoir*.

“Maladaptive drinking is often linked to early trauma, such as abuse, in which the person is drinking to numb themselves,” says Karen Graham, an addictions counsellor and a recovery coach near Barrie, ON. “As long as you’re using alcohol, you aren’t dealing with the underlying issues. People who drink excessively may choose to work with a counsellor to get to the root of why they’re self-medicating.”

But drinking as a relax-and-reward reflex is a different thing. Graham says those in this category – people like me – often find it easier to cut back or quit than those who drink to self-medicate. Maybe that’s why I didn’t find it as hard to stop drinking for 21 days as I’d anticipated. The positive impact was almost immediate. Within three days, I was sleeping better – more deeply and soundly than in years. I woke up earlier in the morning, feeling clear-headed and energized. Late-night snacking – a

common habit when my defences were down after a few drinks – was eliminated. The first Friday night without wine was hard: Work had wrapped up, the kids were out, and I was making a nice dinner for me and my husband, listening to music, ready to relax and reaching for the comfortingly familiar sleek stem of a wineglass. That phantom drink was a palpable absence. Then there was the cottage weekend with girlfriends that landed near the end of the 21 days. I braced for the deprivation I’d feel during late-night confessional conversations over topped-up glasses of wine, but to my surprise, I breezed through the weekend buzzing on the singular pleasure of being in the company of lively friends.

Over 21 days, the Facebook group shared hundreds of posts with suggested articles and books, tips for non-alcoholic drinks (Molson Exel was a favourite) and stop-drinking strategies – from thinking of cravings as a wave (“there’s a rise, a crest and a fall”) to mentally superimposing the skull-and-crossbones symbol for toxic substances over the mental image of a favourite drink. One person added up how much he figured long-term drinking cost him over the past 30 years (about \$60,000). Another said she felt like she was being a better example to her teenage daughter. We shared tales of when we fell off the wagon: champagne served at a birthday party, a couple of beers to celebrate winning a sailing race, a sad night thinking about past losses. A few found the challenge difficult – one woman with a particularly stressful job wasn’t able to make it through the first week and resolved to try another time.

But once the challenge was over, most people were surprised by how much better they felt. “For 40 years, a meal without alcohol was like a day without sunshine,” said Larry. “I didn’t really think I’d make it on day one. Consuming less is now part of my lifestyle.”

The 21-day no-booze Facebook challenge helped me rethink the way I drink. Today, I no longer keep booze in the house. I restrict my drinking to weekends, unless it’s a special occasion. On Friday nights, my husband and I share one really good bottle of wine. My new goal is to stop at two drinks – three drinks max – and to not exceed the recommended 10-drink weekly maximum.

I figured giving up alcohol – even just temporarily – would be like saying goodbye to a dear friend who always made me feel better (except for the morning after). Instead, it was more like reducing time spent with an old pal who was starting to drain me. I still like hanging out with a glass of wine or two from time to time, but it’s no longer a primary relationship. I put booze in its place, and I hope to keep it there. *mt*

COULD YOU BE AN ALCOHOLIC?

Take this quiz to find out if you need to quit drinking. The 26-question “Am I Alcoholic Self Test” (ncadd.org/get-help/take-the-test/am-i-alcoholic-self-test) from the National Council on Alcoholism and Drug Dependence indicates whether you may have a drinking problem.