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Drinking, not drowning

Experts and reformed bingers weigh in on the Holy Grail of drinking: moderation.



Taking control ... Viv Groskop learned to overcome "epic displays" of drunkenness.
Photo: Guardian New and Media

I am not an alcoholic but I do have a problem with drink. I rarely get properly drunk - maybe two or three times a year - but when I do, it's on a shameful, monumental scale. Historically, this has often coincided with the Christmas party season.

This year, however, will be different. Or that is the idea, at least.

Six months ago, after I found myself telling friends yet another "hilarious" tale of a drunken incident, I embarked on a self-imposed period of alcoholic awareness, designed to remove the possibility of ever again being incapacitated by drink. I realised that unless I could find a way to avoid my epic displays I would be forced down the route of the alcoholic and have to give up drink completely. I was going to have to learn to deal with one drink at a time. Here's what I, and others in my position, have discovered.

First, establish whether you have a drink problem

This is easier said than done. *Hypnotherapist* Georgia Foster, author of *The Drink Less Mind* (Foster Publishing) and a specialist in helping people gain control around alcohol, says: "Sometimes we all drink too much. The odd, one-off 'blitzing

it' moment is fine. But if it's a regular occurrence and it's not in check, that's a problem." That may be the case for many, but although my drunkenness was infrequent, to me, those blitzes felt problematic. Tania Glyde, author of *Cleaning Up: How I Gave Up Drinking and Lived (Serpent's Tail)*, agrees that defining the extent of your drink problem is often subjective. "When I gave up drinking, lots of people said to me, 'You weren't that big a drinker'. Some people are able to drink huge amounts and not worry about it. I think you only have a problem when you reach your personal limit of shame."

Sarah (*not her real name*), 29, faced this question three years ago. Now a personal trainer, she used to work in the City where binge drinking after work was common. "I wasn't an alcoholic in that I didn't need to drink every day," she says. "But if I went out, I had only to have one glass and I just wanted to keep on and on. Every time I drank, it would result in me getting drunk. I didn't have any control." She was becoming increasingly miserable, smoking more and overeating, too.

Try hypnotherapy

In 2005 Sarah saw a hypnotherapist for 12 one-hour sessions which, she says, helped re-programme her mind, and convince her that she has control over her actions. It also helped her deal with other issues which were causing her stress and exacerbating her binge drinking. She now finds it easy to stop at two or three units. (She has also stopped smoking.) "I am at a point where I will happily say during an evening's drinking, 'Shall we just have a cup of tea?' instead of, 'Come on, let's do some shots'."

Be proactive, and prepared to lie

Since her successful hypnotherapy sessions, Sarah still follows some tried and tested practical steps to help control her drinking. And I can vouch for the fact that these tips work even if you haven't been hypnotised (I've always found hypnosis a bit freaky). "Always order a glass of water with every alcoholic drink," says Sarah, "and drink them simultaneously. Stick to small drinks: be firm if someone insists on you having a large glass. If they complain, tell them you prefer small glasses because the drink stays colder." Be prepared for hostility, she adds: "A few people I used to work with did not respond to it well because they felt it was a judgment on them. I would just say: 'Get lost.'"

If it gets too much, says Foster, resort to fibbing. "Pretend you're taking antibiotics, that you have a big meeting the next day or that you have a hangover. Drinking less can be a big social problem - people feel guilty about it. They feel they have to fit in with the social environment by drinking too much." In my experience, this is not always the case: I was with a very drunk friend the other night and apologised for ordering a Diet Coke. "You don't have to justify yourself to me," he slurred. The truth is, most people are too distracted by their own drinking to notice yours.

The other advice I have assiduously followed over the past six months is screamingly obvious, but it works. "It's all common sense really - eat before going out," says Don Shenker, chief executive of Alcohol Concern. "And don't drink in rounds," he adds, "because you feel obliged to have another drink even if you don't really want one." That sounds a bit Scrooge-like to me. My advice is: buy rounds if you can afford it, just exclude yourself if you want to.

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If you can't manage alcohol-free days, you are in trouble

Having a few days a week when you don't drink at all is crucial for gaining control of your alcohol consumption, says Foster. But seven out of 10 of her clients are bemused when she advises this. "Most of the people I see have drunk pretty much every day since they went to university." Personally, I can go for days without drinking, though, and then have no idea of moderation when I do drink. Commonly, people who are infrequent binge drinkers are perfectionists, says Foster. "They're very good when they're not drinking, but as soon as they drink, their rebelliousness comes out and they become "perfect" at doing the opposite of what they're supposed to. When I work with someone like that I try to tell them to stop driving the system so perfectly - because something is going to give." This is me all over.

Exercise extreme vigilance around free booze

"There is a real attitude of, 'If it's free, we are obliged to consume it'," says Glyde. "It seems rude not to swipe as much free alcohol as possible." Plus, alcohol is not called a social lubricant for nothing: "Work-related parties can be so intimidating," she says. "Especially if you are supposed to be networking. Everyone is looking over their shoulders, gimlet-eyed. The pressure of having to act like someone you're not brings out the child in all of us. I can remember spitting wine over a company director once and thinking, 'Aren't I clever? I'm really pissed, but I don't care.'" If you are aware of all these factors, have admitted to yourself that you are nervous or intimidated, then you don't have to get caught up in them.

Shenker's key party survival suggestion is to avoid top-ups from waiters: "Finish your glass and pick up a fresh one so you know exactly how much you've had. Decide in advance how much you are going to drink and stick to it."

If in doubt, don't drink at all

If you are like me, then there will be some times in your life - periods of stress, anxiety or childish over-excitement - when you are better off not drinking because the risk of getting trolleyed is too high. Taking the car is my top tip for complete alcohol avoidance in these situations. When I first resolved never to get drunk again I drove everywhere for weeks and drank nothing. Once you've done that for a while, when you start drinking again you can re-learn your limits. Now I know how I feel after one glass (not much different to sober), how I feel after two (a bit merry), and after three (disastrously drunk and ready to become more so). For the first time in my life I have an idea of when I am supposed to stop. I can say from experience that it is far more rewarding than letting gravity decide.

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