

HOW BOOZE-DEPENDENT IS YOUR SOCIAL LIFE?

We use alcohol to celebrate every occasion and to fast-track connections.

Katherine Gougeon explores how the Sober Curious movement gives you the freedom to rethink why and when (or if) you drink.

British journalist Ruby Warrington began to suspect that she was “kind of just a little bit addicted to booze” around the time she and a friend drank several vodka sodas, squeezed themselves into opposing legs of an adult onesie and took a face plant while staggering through the streets of London. Warrington’s head was bashed bloody, but instead of asking to be taken to the ER, she insisted the best medicine would be a “chunky slug of single malt whisky.”

This is exactly the type of harrowing anecdote you’d expect to read in an article about why people quit drinking. If this were such a piece, it would go on to weave a tapestry of the bad decisions, regrettable texts, crappy sexual encounters, morning-after pain and guilt, health implications and scary statistics that ladder up to the drinker realizing their habit is out of control. Narratives like these are in endless supply; just ask Google if you should give up drinking.

HOW TO STAY IN THE SOCIAL MIX IF YOU'RE NOT DRINKING

Although I’m a moderate drinker, alcohol (or the lack thereof) still dictates how dressed up I’ll get, how late I’ll stay out and what conversation topics I’ll put forward. Also (and this is terrible), when I meet someone for the first time, my brain automatically wanders to the question “Day friend or night friend?” A new friend who doesn’t drink is a day friend—a category that includes breastfeeders, people who wake up

While these articles are usually written in the spirit of confession or public service, they have an unintended side effect: They reinforce the impression that absolutely nobody gives up drinking from a quiet place. Abstinence is presented not as a viable life choice in itself but as the last refuge of the damned. If someone is not drinking, we automatically assume it’s because they have a problem with alcohol. As Chelsea Handler likes to say, “There are two kinds of people I don’t trust: people who don’t drink and people who collect stickers.” Why is a sober person a suspect person?

“Whether we’re at home, at work or on a hot date, a glass of wine or a cold one is the universal code for ‘Let’s connect,’” says Warrington, who, after the onesie incident, went on to move to Brooklyn and write *Sober Curious: The Blissful Sleep, Greater Focus, Limitless Presence, and Deep Connection Awaiting Us All on the Other Side of Alcohol*. “There’s a conditioned distrust of people who opt out of the dominant

PHOTOGRAPH BY DANNY KIM/THE LICENSING PROJECT.COM



drinking culture. Not drinking is like not being on social media; you’re seen as a weird loner who doesn’t like people.” Part memoir, part how-to guide, the book makes the case for a life without alcohol, whether you are “kind of just a little bit addicted” or not.

Unlike Alcoholics Anonymous, an addiction recovery program where the goal is to never drink again, Sober Curious is a wellness-oriented mindset in which you opt to get curious about your relationship with alcohol, consciously choosing to examine every instinct, invitation and expectation

to drink. By asking questions like “How will this drink make me feel and will it enhance or detract from the situation?” a Sober Curious person begins to zero in on the emotional, social and physical factors that trigger the impulse to imbibe. “Think of Sober Curious as a social experiment that gives you the freedom to assess whether or not to drink or how much to consume, on a case-by-case basis, without having to label yourself a non-drinker or feeling the pressure to be perfect,” says Warrington. She notes that although no two Sober Curious journeys are alike, each revolves around the same central question: “Would my life be better without alcohol?”

The concept of making drinking a mindful, conscious decision versus a knee-jerk reaction driven by habit, social anxiety or FOMO is being explored the world over by social clubs that offer all the trappings of a night out but with none of the morning aftermath. Organizations like Club SÖDA NYC (Sober or Debating Abstinence) and Hello Sunday Morning in Australia help members develop healthier and more intentional relationships with alcohol through booze-free meet-ups, workshops and events. Warrington (who co-founded Club SÖDA NYC) notes that although only about 50 per cent of the club’s members are non-drinkers, many are drawn to Sober Curious as a logical evolution of their wellness lifestyle. “When you invest enough time, energy and money into your health, fitness and self-care practices, the idea of being hungover can start to feel counterproductive,” she says.

The quietly revolutionary possibility of a life without hangovers is also being advanced by the friendly neighbourhood “sober bars” popping up in cities like New York, Austin, London and Dublin. While the alcohol-free-bar trend has yet to manifest in Canada, Toronto-based bartender Josh Lindley has noticed a more mindful approach to drinking taking root among bar and restaurant patrons. He links the phenomenon to the modern craft-cocktail movement, which he believes has inspired customers to seek out specific, high-end taste experiences and shift their emphasis from quantity to quality. “Alcohol is seen less as a social lubricant and more as an ingredient with a flavour profile; plus, when customers notice how much time and »

"Certain relationships may appear in a new light, as the veil of fake chemistry and fast intimacy created by alcohol lifts and you start seeing people and situations as they really are."

effort is being put into creating house-made syrups and small-batch bitters, they feel less sheepish about ordering the non-alcoholic version of the drink," explains Lindley, who bristles at the term "mocktail" because it implies that the people who drink them are being mocked.

While Vancouverite Jacques Martiquet predicts that the age-old bond between alcohol and human celebratory rituals won't dissolve any day soon, he has not been deterred from developing an alternative gateway to fun, excitement and liberation. Drawing on his degree in pharmacology and research into the human brain, the 23-year-old launched VYVE, a "social connectedness" agency dedicated to providing "novel, epic and extraordinary" drug-free entertainment experiences. To date, Martiquet has hosted hundreds of renegade events around the world that use music, movement and humour to mimic the disinhibiting effects of alcohol. "A raised heart rate, laughter and human touch activate the same pleasure- and reward-based neural pathways as alcohol," he explains. "The only difference is that your frontal lobe remains active so you can still make smart, civilized decisions."

A self-described "party scientist," Martiquet believes fun shouldn't be serious or status boosting, and many of the activities he dreams up—like dancing barefoot to Village People on the beach at 7 a.m., airport flash mobs and undie runs—are a direct send-up of pretentious nightlife culture. "I want to rip apart the Instagram-fuelled status obsession of it all by putting people in goofy situations and giving them the freedom to be themselves—to get comfortable connecting with others, outside

Wear red lipstick and heels for breakfast. Even if you have no intention of partaking in the mimosas, embrace the extroverted and conversational spirit of the occasion by showing up with style and attitude.

Find a day DJ party—it doesn't have to be all yoga and coffee dates. Get a fix on the sober dance party and social scene in your area by checking out VYVE and Daybreaker, both of which host engaging, active events designed to induce a natural high.

Start edgy conversations. You don't have to be drunk to share juicy sex stories or wade into a political debate. In fact, it's more exciting when you can feel the impact of your words.

Be direct. Let your friends know it sucks to not be invited out at night just because you're not drinking, and call out their sober prejudice.

Be indirect. When someone asks why you're not drinking, say "Why are you?"

their comfort zone, without the crutch of alcohol," he says.

It's one thing to get high on life at a booze-free bike rave or while savouring a Seedlip and tonic at your local craft bar, but what happens when you're the only one at the club, party or wedding who's not drinking? Warrington admits that getting comfortable in these situations is a process and there's no getting around the hump of your Sober First (a.k.a. the first time you partake in a key social event sober). But if you can get past your initial fears and anxieties—"What if people think I have a drinking problem? How will I talk to anyone new? Will I come across as judge-y? What if everything feels boring?"—you may be rewarded with some unexpected insights and realizations. "Certain relationships may appear in a new light, as the veil of fake chemistry and fast intimacy created by alcohol lifts and you start seeing people and situations as they really are," says Warrington. In other words, topics like "If we're both still single at 39, should we get married?" and "How far are we from Singularity?" may lose their lustre—as might conversations about how terrible everyone is, whether you've ever been inside a washing machine and how much you love soup.

Which brings us to the truly moderate drinker. What, if anything, does Sober Curious have to offer the person for whom two drinks seldom turn into three and who has never once had Google reassure them that their hangover isn't fatal? Potentially nothing, but Warrington suggests giving it a try anyway just to see how it feels and to know you can. "What started off as a social experiment has, for me, become an endlessly fascinating, confidence-building and empowering challenge where the longer I go without drinking, the deeper the connection I feel to myself and others," she says. Although Warrington can't think of any reason or occasion in which she herself would crave a drink, toppling the dominant drinking culture or judging the consumption habits of others isn't what Sober Curious is about. Its mission is simply to create a world where it is as normal to refuse a cocktail as it is to enjoy one—to make alcohol a choice just like any other. □