

# SOME SOBERING THOUGHTS ABOUT ALCOHOL

BY

EDMUND AND HELEN TIRBUTT

*Beat the Booze is a new jargon-free book published by Harriman House which has received outstanding reviews from alcohol experts. It aims to help anyone who wishes to cut out or cut down alcohol - even if only for lifestyle reasons - and anyone wishing to help someone else with a drink problem. Here Helen and Edmund Tirbutt, the book's co-authors, give us a flavour of some of the main conclusions they have reached from their research.*

In our view it is time to forget the word 'alcoholic', which must be one of the most misleading and outdated terms in the English language. It should be replaced with the words 'drink problem'.

Most people with drink problems are capable of presenting a convincing case for why they are not an alcoholic, and regularly do so to their family and friends. For example, they can point out that they only ever drink in the evenings, that they never drink spirits that they can give up for short periods, or that they can't remember the first time they drank alcohol - not because they're currently drunk but because they've heard that all alcoholics can!

The term alcoholic can therefore act as a convenient shield for someone in denial about their drinking to hide behind. As long as they haven't actually sunk to the level of that tramp they see swigging Tennents Extra every day near their local train station, they will take comfort from the fact that they do not consider themselves to be an alcoholic. This can perpetuate stress and self-loathing for longer than is actually necessary as a result of failing to acknowledge and address the fact that they are drinking at unhealthy levels.

However mild someone's drink problem, their alcohol intake will gradually increase as their body becomes used to current levels and requires more to create the same effect. Delay therefore equals deterioration. Eventually someone who has only a psychological addiction to alcohol can also develop a physical addiction - and will start to experience significant withdrawal symptoms if they don't drink.

And it is not just people who are out of work who fall into this category. It is quite possible for someone with a physical addiction to go through the entire working day without drinking, but when they arrive home after work they will typically down alcohol within fifteen minutes of walking through the door and will continue drinking until they go to bed." I only have a couple of drinks in the evening" is the classic defence, but most people who drink heavily underestimate their drinking

by at least half when talking to others. "A couple" can easily mean three or four and each "glass" can easily amount to three or four times the standard pub measure.

## A lifestyle change

We also feel that the option of becoming teetotal never receives the attention it deserves as a means of effecting a significant lifestyle change. Many people who feel dissatisfied with the state of their lives seem willing to consider making radical changes such as switching career or relocating to another country. But for some reason giving up drinking fails to enter the mindset.

This is highly illogical because giving up drinking involves far less personal upheaval and fewer potential downsides than, for example, emigrating to Australia or retraining to become a lawyer. There are numerous people who have made the wrong career changes and have ended up feeling more stressed than they were in the job they started in. We are not, however, aware of a single case of someone who has become a long-term teetotaler who doesn't claim to be happier and less stressed than when they were drinking.

Unfortunately, we are not able to make quite such positive recommendations about those who merely cut down. Whilst any significant reduction in alcohol consumption should be considered a 'good thing', an alarming number of those we have come across who have tried cutting down still drink at levels way above the government's safe drinking guidelines.

Numerous alcohol experts we interviewed during our research are unanimous that any drinker who has had a physical addiction should never touch another drop because, even if they have abstained for 30 or 40 years, as soon as they have another drink their brain's response centre is likely to have changed permanently with regard to alcohol and this will cause them to start drinking again at their former levels most immediately. It is not a question of mind over matter because the matter has changed - the brain has been permanently re-programmed.

## Cutting down

Those who have only developed psychological addictions can sometimes revert to controlled drinking in the future if they give up for a initial period and successfully tackle the underlying reasons that were causing them to drink in the first place. Here stress counselling can play a crucial role.

Professor Cary Cooper, who is Professor of Organisational Psychology and Health at Lancaster University Management School, says "In quite a large number of cases, a drink problem might signify stress-related problems. So you should try and deal with the underlying sources of the problem. It could be one of a

number of work or non-work related issues."

Some of those who are trying to cut down may find they benefit from some of the newer de-alcoholised wines and beers sold through specialist retailers. These taste far superior to versions that have traditionally been available in supermarkets and pubs and are certainly worth considering. So is EEG Neurofeedback, an innovative scientific approach that uses highly specialist video games to enable problem drinkers to return to moderate drinking.

London and St. Albans based Dr. Surinder Kaur, who pioneered this treatment, told us "People usually drink because they have a brainwave band that is under-functioning, and it makes them feel agitated. That calm, happy, contented feeling is normally in short supply with anyone with addiction problems. With this technique we effectively give the individual the power to self-regulate their behaviour."

Attending meditation classes or listening to meditation tapes at home is also highly recommended, as is having alternative therapies like reflexology, Indian head massages and Reiki.

Nic Witham, Director of Banyan Retreat Healing Centre, based near Ashford in Kent, says "Alcohol is a mind changing substance that is often used by people to

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'relieve' stress and tension. In fact, there are many other things a person can turn to which are much more effective and healthy than alcohol. For example, any form of mediation is an excellent means of achieving a more peaceful state of mind."

But anyone who has really conquered a drink problem should find holding an alcoholic drink in their hand no more stressful than holding a cup of tea or coffee, and very few people who cut down ever manage to recover to such a level. Many long-term teetotallers, on the other hand, never crave a drink. They normally find that an automatic pilot takes over after they have been dry for one or two years and some actually get a buzz out of being in situations when alcohol is present because it reminds them what a fantastic feat they have achieved in turning their lives around and giving up for good.

### Time for action

Please don't think we are party poopers. For the majority of people who don't have any problem in controlling their drinking our advice is simply to enjoy themselves to the full. But it doesn't take a genius to work out

that if any other past-time was invented today that harmed a quarter of the adult population it would be instantly banned.

Problem drinkers are effectively paying the price of the widespread availability of a drug that causes far more harm than some illegal drugs but which will clearly never be made illegal. The Government should, however, reduce the problem by imposing significant tax increases. The price of alcohol relative to average incomes has halved since the mid 1960s yet there is plenty of evidence to suggest that increasing the price of alcohol directly reduces consumption of it and therefore the harm caused by it.

The Government should also make it a high priority to provide far more information on the dangers of alcohol as there are clearly millions of British people who are drinking at hazardous levels but who regard themselves purely as social drinkers. An educational programme for the young which dispels the myth that it is impossible not to have a good time without getting completely wrecked is also essential.

In due course attitudes towards bingeing and heavy social drinking will inevitably change, just as they have done with other harmful outmoded practices like smoking in public places, heavy lunchtime drinking by business people and drink-driving. But it is likely to take the best part of a generation for this to happen. So any problem drinker, who simply waits for such a new dawn to break, may well fail to live to see the day.

They therefore have a straight choice between doing something about their drink problem now or spending the rest of their life stressing over it. There is no middle ground because failure to confront the problem is effectively taking the latter choice.

Further information about Beat the Booze can be obtained from [www.beatthebooze.com](http://www.beatthebooze.com) and copies can be ordered from the same website at a 33% discount for only £6.49 (+p&p). They can also be ordered at this price from the Harriman House bookshop Tel: 01730 233870.

