

# soberful

UNCOVER  
A SUSTAINABLE,  
FULFILLING LIFE  
FREE OF  
ALCOHOL

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**Before you stop drinking:**

The information in this book is for educational purposes only and is not meant to replace any advice from a health-care professional. Please consult your health-care professional before you give up alcohol. Withdrawal from alcohol can be life threatening and even fatal.

## CHAPTER 1

# How Do I Know If I Should Stop or Not?

**M**ost clients who reach out to me are aware that something is wrong in their lives, but they're not convinced the problem is alcohol. Most initially want to become "social" or "normal" drinkers again. A few are open to a period of abstinence, but nearly all are horrified by the idea of never drinking again. That feels like a fate worse than death.

But on some level, they know that their relationship with alcohol doesn't add up anymore. And I think to some degree they also know that their struggle is masking deeper issues. We have an inkling that we use alcohol to cope with feelings and emotions we couldn't otherwise manage.

I want you to know that no one ends up in front of me by accident. You are not reading this book by accident. I've never had anyone reach out to me via my website, my Soberful Facebook group, or my programs and thought to myself, *Blimey, what are they doing here? They are absolutely fine.* If they think about alcohol enough to click my link, that's the giveaway.

## WOULD YOU LIKE A SANDWICH?

Here's one of my favorite analogies: If you think about drinking more than you think about sandwiches, that's a red flag.

How often do most people typically think about sandwiches? Twice a week? Three or four times? Never? Every so often you may think, *I fancy a sandwich*—and you buy a sandwich. You eat your sandwich, and you enjoy it. Then the next day you might have a salad.

Later in the week you might have another sandwich or maybe not. A sandwich is something you enjoy from time to time but don't give much thought to.

When someone has an appropriate relationship with alcohol, they really don't give it any thought. Do you think about alcohol the same way I think about sandwiches? I didn't think so. Otherwise you never would have picked up this book.

This is a simple concept, but our society has moved the goalpost so far that we no longer recognize what normal drinking looks like. Alcohol is a product made by companies for profit. The more you drink, the more they profit. So, they have a strong incentive to fudge what an alcohol problem looks like. Like, we're talking some serious camouflaging. Which is why abusive drinking has been redefined as normal, and we have created a culture where alcohol is inserted into every imaginable circumstance.

## ASKING THE WRONG QUESTIONS

When you question your drinking, you probably compare yourself to other people who drink more than you and have more apparent consequences. You feel reassured that you're "not that bad," and then you think no more about it until the next hangover. But that nagging little voice doesn't go away, does it? Deep down you know you shouldn't be drinking this much.

Most drinkers ask themselves the wrong questions. Instead of asking, *Is my drinking bad enough to stop?* we need to ask, *Does drinking make my life better? Is this good enough for me?* If you're a parent, add this question: *Would I want my children to drink the same way?*

I don't want to put you on a downer, but please stick with me because I can imagine what you are feeling right now. You probably have an uncomfortable feeling in the pit of your stomach—a feeling of dread and fear that maybe you'll have to quit drinking for good, and if so, your life will be over.

Keep reading, my friend, because I have some good news for you. Not only is your life most certainly *not* over, but you are also going to find out that everything you thought about sobriety is entirely wrong—a lie, in fact. The truth about sobriety will blow your mind. I am not exaggerating. Tell that ball of fear in your stomach right now that you are just going to be open to the possibility of discovering something new. You are not making any commitments or decisions right now. You can change your mind at any time. Does that feel a little better? Remember, you can stop reading this book and go back to how things were anytime you want. You are under no obligation. Alcohol is always going to be there.

As we start this journey I want to clarify the difference between being “sober” and being alcohol-free. Sobriety is for people who have come to the point where they have recognized that alcohol is causing problems in their life and they need to stop drinking. It is about working on the deeper emotional issues that led to and perpetuated alcohol becoming a problem. *Alcohol-free* is a new term that people use and tends to mean people who have recognized that it's just healthier not to drink alcohol and want to socialize without it. They also want to create space in their lives for personal development. I use both terms in this book. Regardless

of which one you identify with, you will find lots to benefit you in this program—from understanding how our perception of alcohol and sobriety has been manipulated to practicing the five pillars of sobriety to enhance your own personal development.

## **APPROPRIATE VERSUS NECESSARY**

I grew up in the UK and did years of self-destructive drinking there, but I've lived most of my adult life in the United States. Although there are differences in the British and American drinking cultures, the attitudes that Western cultures in general have toward alcohol are similar enough that we can discuss them together. These cultural attitudes have played a big part in how we have ended up here.

Alcohol is deliberately associated with as many positive experiences and celebrations as possible. Most people can't even imagine a birthday party, Christmas dinner, wedding, coworker socializing event, school reunion, or weekend without alcohol. I believe it's fair to argue that alcohol is appropriate in many of those situations, but there's an important distinction between *appropriate* use and *required* use. We can do all of those things sober without our joy or fun being in any way diminished.

But the distinction between optional and required has been almost completely lost. We now view a significant number of events as inconceivable without alcohol. We have been persuaded that without alcohol, none of those events can be tolerable, let alone fun. We believe we need alcohol to really enjoy them.

What bothers me most is the expansion of events and situations that alcohol is now being associated with. I've even recently seen yoga studios offering yoga and wine events—because a toxin-laden, dehydrating, central-nervous-system-depressing substance is exactly what you want with your yoga session.

But the one that perturbs me the most is alcohol and motherhood. In particular, those cute little memes on social media and T-shirts that are meant to be hilarious. For example:

- “Kids happen. Wine helps.” No, it doesn’t. It makes you feel tired and cranky.
- “I’m the reason Mommy needs wine” (seen on a onesie). Mommy needs a nap and some support.
- “They whine. I wine.” I get it; parenting is hard.

You can probably name half a dozen more. Please stand back while I exhaust myself with eye rolls. Okay, thanks, that’s much better.

The “Mommy needs wine” drinking culture is screaming that being a mother is so grim that you need alcohol just to survive it. Men reading this book may be tempted to skip the parts about women’s drinking, but this applies to you as well, as male culture also uses humor to reinforce abusive drinking habits.

What I take particular issue with is the dishonesty around drinking, especially binge drinking, which is deceitfully presented as fun and without consequences. There’s a myth that there are only two camps of drinkers: those who can’t handle it (full-blown alcoholics) and everyone else (the majority who can handle it just fine). In reality, *many* people drink to excess who don’t fit the definition of an alcoholic, but they definitely face consequences—hangovers, embarrassment, depression, anxiety, spending too much money, loss of opportunities, or the dullness alcohol brings to your mind and soul. We use our spin-doctor skills to turn our consequences into a humorous story to entertain our friends, while burying our shame, embarrassment, and self-disgust.

We have normalized abnormal drinking by brushing away its severe and frequent consequences. It’s a collective and deliberate



denial that alcohol causes any consequences whatsoever to the vast majority who can “handle it.” Hangovers are shrugged away as insignificant and irrelevant. Alcohol is fun, something we need; it is our right. And it is now being inserted into all parenting activities.

This new “Mommy needs wine” culture strikes me as a barely concealed primal scream. Women lack the support, childcare, and community that are necessary to raise a child. Being a mother is demanding, exhausting, and lonely. Which makes it easy to buy into the lie that alcohol is the best way to create the connection and relief mothers are craving.

Mothers are desperate to hold on to some part of their former selves because motherhood is way, way harder than they expected. And if they can't get proper support from their society or spouses, at least they deserve a drink! Women have, of course, been culturally conditioned for decades to believe there is nothing wrong with deserving or rewarding themselves with alcohol. Holly Whitaker describes this culture in her book *Quit Like a Woman*. She points out how alcohol marketing misleads women and deliberately obscures the devastating consequences to their health. She also emphasizes that research and paths to sobriety do not yet reflect women's unique needs.<sup>1</sup>

I believe the hypocrisy of the “Mommy needs wine” culture falls apart when you view how white women drinkers and women of color drinkers are perceived and treated differently. Cute memes and jokes about drunk mommies are seen as harmless fun when it's a middle-class white mom. But how would a mother of color be perceived? Would a drunk mom of color in charge of her kids be seen the same way? How would *she* be judged? Do you think that Child Protective Services would see this differently? The idea that “Mommy needs wine” is something that is unquestioned for middle- and upper-class white

women. Women of color and working-class women would not be afforded the same luxury.<sup>2</sup> I asked Grachelle Sherburne, a licensed clinical social worker and psychotherapist what her thoughts were and she told me the following:

The accepted notion that has been perpetuated in our society that mothers NEED to drink wine to “make it through” motherhood is an example of white privilege. If there was an organized group of women of color, socially drinking in a public place with their babies on their hips, the Department of Family and Children Services would be called immediately. As a social worker, I have seen calls being made to Child Protective Services on families of color, but for the same situation, resources, and support be given instead to white families.<sup>3</sup>

Doesn't that shift the perception of whether the “Mommy needs wine” drinking culture is harmless or not?

The companies that benefit from excessive drinking have quietly, cleverly, and very successfully inserted alcohol into places it doesn't belong, with no focus on the true costs of drinking. Contemporary mom culture is one of the most insidious examples.

## **WHAT ABOUT MEN?**

Throughout their lives, men who abuse alcohol are treated very differently from women who do the same.<sup>4</sup> Drinking to excess is a significant part of male bonding, fraternity culture, sporting events, and almost every traditional major life achievement, from a graduation party to a wake. In the UK when a man becomes a father it is *expected* of him to get blind drunk. It's called

“wetting the baby’s head.” However, the problems for men are also generally internal as well.

Not to reinforce stereotypes, but it’s true that society in general still limits the emotions that men are allowed to feel. Anger, triumph, and apathy are fine; anything else is uncool or un-masculine. Alcohol, however, provides an acceptably masculine opportunity to unleash other emotions. Drunk men are given a free pass to weep on each other’s shoulders or yell out “I love you man!” or lament the defeat of their favorite sports teams. They’re allowed to express sadness about a job loss, a breakup, or a death in the family if they are drinking.

But without alcohol? A man who cries at the office after being fired would never hear the end of it. Neither would other kinds of emotional outbursts, like crying when you’re sad about something, be accepted. Until society really and truly encourages men to express their full range of emotions while sober, the lure of excessive drinking will remain potent. For men, alcohol can be a powerful vehicle that finally allows them to express feelings, a reprieve from the restrictions that have been culturally imposed upon them. The construction of masculinity is very entwined with alcohol use and abuse of what it means to be a man.<sup>5</sup>

## **THE LAND OF FUN, EXCITEMENT, BELONGING, CONNECTION, RELAXATION, REWARDS, AND ROMANCE**

At this point I hope you can see how alcohol inserts itself into as many places as possible as a solution to whatever problems we are struggling with. But the reason that alcohol is so insidious is because we have been convinced it’s the best vehicle to get us to the land of fun, excitement, belonging, connection, relaxation, rewards, and romance, or simply, The Land. That’s a long list, covering so many important things we all want and need as part

of a satisfactory human experience. I mean, who *doesn't* want to go to that land? I know I did and still do. But it's not always easy; many of us feel like we don't fit in, that we are on the outside looking in. As we struggle to achieve those things, how tempting it is to reach for a quick, easy, inexpensive solution that requires little effort on our part. We just need a couple of drinks, and—abracadabra!—we are in The Land, *or at least perceive ourselves to be*.

We have absorbed this message so entirely that most of us believe at an intense level that giving up alcohol would mean being cut off from ever visiting this land again. A devastating thought! That's why drinkers tell me that quitting is the last thing they want to do—even when it's abundantly clear that alcohol is causing unpleasant consequences—and why they persist in their efforts to control or manage their drinking or to get back to drinking “normally,” long after they have crossed the line.

It's not really giving up alcohol that's terrifying—it's the belief that we would be giving up our entrance ticket to that wonderful, mythical, elusive land. And this faulty belief is why you are struggling.

## THE GOOD NEWS

Believe it or not, this is good news, and you're actually in a fabulous place right now. I know that feels hard to believe, but please trust me. You have no idea what will happen next, but I do. In the rest of this book, I'm going to prove that not only can you stop drinking and stay stopped, but you can also be happy being yourself, enjoy full connection with life and those around you, and never miss out on any fun.

I'm going to show you how to get to The Land without alcohol and—here's the kicker—why it's much, *much better* that way. I know that's a hard idea to absorb, because it contradicts nearly