

Holiday Cocktails

A little beer, a little wine, drink up, it's Solstice time

Bottle of wine, fruit of the vine, when you gonna let me get sober. Let me alone. Let me go home. Let me go back and start over. (Tom Paxton – “Bottle of Wine”)

Whether it's the Christmas Cosmo, the Candy Cane Martini, the Grinch, the Scroogedriver, the Snow Job, high octane Egg Nog, Hot Buttered Rum, or standard beer or wine, alcohol is the social lubricant that makes many holiday celebrations flow. And let's face it, there are some bosses, co-workers, relatives and/or members of our partner's cadre of friends that go better with a buzz. The spirit of the season creates a suspension of sobriety norms so that when someone staggers a little, shows up at the doorstep bellowing, “Kiss me you fool,” does a headstand in the middle of the table or sends a picture of their left nostril to everyone in their phonebook, it's kinda funny. And even when it's not so funny, most of us are able to excuse it because we know that the holiday season is sort of like an extended cocktail hour. Besides, it's hard to judge someone else's drunken behavior if we remember having done something equally stupid under the influence.

Still, even during the holiday season, there are limits to social tolerance. When someone slides past tipsy into flat out drunk, it's not so funny anymore. It's painful to talk to someone who's so impaired that they can't formulate their thoughts, embarrassing to watch them stagger and fall and horrifying to see them climb behind the wheel of a car. Drunkenness is even less amusing when it's the norm rather than the exception. Frequent drunkenness is a sign of alcohol abuse. Other signs of alcohol abuse are:

- A Jekyll and Hyde personality change (i.e. a generally shy person becomes loud and outgoing or a generally mild mannered person becomes belligerent and abusive)
- Increased irritability and a lower threshold for violence
- Risky behavior such as driving well beyond the safe limit, walking in areas that are risky in the best of circumstances or engaging in unsafe or nonconsensual sex
- Emotional volatility marked by yelling, screaming or sobbing over things that seem trivial to a sober mind
- Blackouts in which entire spans of time or conversations are forgotten
- Avoidance of activities that don't involve the opportunity to drink
- Unwillingness to discuss drinking and/or becoming annoyed at people who express concern about drinking
- Sneaking drinks and/or gulping first drinks,
- Feeling guilt and/or shame about drinking or drunken behavior
- Inability to control one's drinking so that “just one drink” rapidly leads to more
- Missing or being late to work, school or social or family obligations because of drunkenness or hangovers
- Oversleeping or difficulty sleeping
- Making excuses for drinking
- Doing things to hide the extent of drinking like buying alcohol at different stores or hiding empty bottles

- Worrying about having enough alcohol on hand for an evening or weekend

As abuse progresses towards addiction, you may see:

- Attempts to quit drinking or cut back on the amount are unsuccessful
- Devaluation of relationships as alcohol becomes more important
- Loss of friends and other significant relationships
- Legal problems
- Problems at work or job loss
- Unreasonable resentments
- Marked self pity
- Drinking to avoid the pain of the morning after or to avoid “the shakes” and other symptoms of withdrawal
- Prolonged binges
- Tolerance to alcohol decreases so that it takes less alcohol to produce inebriation

If someone you care about has a drinking problem, you probably feel like you’ve been run through an emotional blender every time they go on a bender. You may become someone you hate in reaction their drinking or go numb to avoid the fear, anger and deep, deep sorrow their drinking brings up for you. Even if you accept the possibility that they can’t control their drinking, you might have the illusion that *you* can control their drinking and its consequences. If you’re the partner, parent, child, or close friend of a problem drinker, you may even catch yourself getting wrapped up in their drinking. You may:

- Focus a great deal of attention on what they are doing, where they are (or aren’t), and how much they drink
- Try to control their drinking by setting limits for them, hiding their alcohol stash or stealing drinks from their glass or bottle so that they don’t get as drunk
- Take responsibility for them, keeping them from making phone calls when their words are fuzzy, and/or apologizing for their behavior
- Corroborate or (or fail to dispute) their lies
- Call in sick for them or do other things to minimize the damage created by their drinking
- Take responsibility for their drinking, finding ways to make their drinking your fault in your head
- Isolate yourself in order to keep their drinking a secret
- Feel shame about their drinking
- Become addicted to the drama surrounding the drinking

If you recognize yourself through the behaviors on any of these lists, it’s time to make some drastic changes. The bottom line is that if you keep doing things the same way you’ve been doing them, you’re gonna keep getting the same results. If you’re not really feeling any motivation to change, take an honest assessment of your life.

- How much money do you (or the drinker you love) spend on alcohol? How much do you spend a week? How much does alcohol cost you per month? Per year?

- What are you missing because of your (or their) drinking? If you looked at a map of your social world, would you see significant relationships becoming more distant or superficial relationships becoming more important? If so, how does this feel?
- Have you cut back on the time you spend playing softball, beading, gardening, playing guitar or doing other things you love because of your (or someone else's) drinking? Is this what you really want?
- Have you lost connection to your life's dream?
- Do you spend a lot of time spinning in contentions relationship drama? If so, is this really the way you want to spend your time?

Take a moment to sit with these answers, to really feel the loss or frustration. When you've had enough, take a deep breath in and release any hopelessness you feel on the exhale. You might have to do this a few more times.

Now think about how you'd like to be. Imagine it in as much detail as you can, starting with how you'd like to feel at the beginning of the day. How would you like to spend your time? Really imagine doing the things you love to do (sans the cocktail). Imagine your relationships – the talks you have with people you want to hang out with and be connected to. Finally, let yourself sit with your life dream for a moment. You may not know it now, but it will come to you eventually if you keep up this visualization process.

If you're getting warmed up to changing, I encourage you to take the next step. Go to a meeting, AA or Al-Anon, to get support working with your particular problem. If you feel overwhelmed or need more intense support, find a counselor.

The holiday season is a time to celebrate putting the old year and old patterns to rest and creating space for new energy, new patterns and new hope. We do this with family, friends and community. Make this the season you let go of your drinking and/or the drama caused by your reaction to someone else's drinking. Get support. Stop drinking yourself into oblivion and/or set healthy boundaries. And if you really need to be buzzed around certain people, perhaps you'd be better off avoiding them entirely. Here's to the first day of the rest of your life!

Originally appeared in Outlook: Everything is Political