



WELLBEING

THE ART OF MINDFUL DRINKING

Forget abstinence and deprivation, mindfulness gives you the freedom to enjoy alcohol on your terms, says Rosamund Dean

Imagine there was a product guaranteed to make you happier, calmer and more confident. Not only that, it will make you thinner and healthier, and give you better skin. You'd buy it, right? You'd probably be prepared to pay quite a lot for it. Then imagine it would actually *save* you money. If you drink more alcohol than you should (and British people drank an enamel-dissolving 40 million litres of Prosecco in 2016), then the magic solution is simply to drink a bit less. This is where mindful drinking – which is essentially training yourself to drink in moderation – comes in.

I know what you're thinking: "Yeah, but that's impossible with my social life/work culture/Tinder dates/stressful job/bonding with 'mum friends'/appreciation of a cold G&T" (delete as appropriate). But between work events and wine at home, and cocktails with friends and Sundays in the pub, you could easily be drinking double the recommended limit of 14 units a week, which is bad news for your body and mind.

You don't have to give up drinking altogether, but wouldn't it be great to wake up clear-headed because you were able to resist that third glass of wine the night before? Moderation might sound deceptively simple, but it's really far more complicated than abstinence because, after one or two drinks, your willpower and decision-making skills go out the window.

Lasting change is particularly challenging, since moderation requires constant awareness of your behaviour and decisions. One of the most common reasons for drinking too much is doing so without really thinking about it – accepting a glass of wine because everyone else is having one, or pouring yourself a drink at home every night purely out of habit.

MINDFUL DRINKING IS EXACTLY WHAT IT SOUNDS LIKE. It's the opposite of drinking without thinking. Dr Sunjeev Kamboj, deputy director of the Clinical Psychopharmacology Unit at University College London (UCL), oversaw a study that found just an 11-minute meditation recording helped heavy drinkers significantly reduce their alcohol intake. "It's encouraging that such a brief set of instructions can have a measurable effect on consumption," says Kamboj. "Mindfulness can shift people's drinking habits and kick-start a process of change." If meditation doesn't work for you (indeed, I never felt I had the time – or the patience – to sit around and think about nothing), there are some other ways to find your way to mindful drinking, outlined here.

Once you've got the hang of mindful awareness, you will be able to use it to identify the real reasons why you drink, making it easier to decide when to do so. Whether you're a weekend binge drinker or a habitual daily drinker, at the root of almost all over-drinking is

anxiety. Think of the *real* reason that daily glass of wine has become a habit.

We use alcohol to manage everything from social anxiety to work stress. A glass of wine may have long been your anxiety off-switch because it slows down your brain, which in turn numbs negative thoughts. But regular drinking interferes with neurotransmitters and lowers the level of serotonin in our brains, making the situation worse, which is why you wake up with raging 'hangxiety'.

"Alcohol is the socially acceptable coping mechanism," says Laura Willoughby, co-founder of mindful drinking movement Club Soda. "When you use it to cope with work or boredom or stress or bad relationships, the hardest part of changing your drinking becomes the fact that you have to cope with all of those things now."

The answer is, rather than numbing uncomfortable feelings with alcohol, to acknowledge and accept them. This is where mindfulness is key, because it's all about awareness. Remember, mindful drinking is not about deprivation. It's about freedom. I say cheers to that.

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1 PRACTISE MINDFUL LIVING

Any activity that requires focus and awareness is an act of mindfulness. Some people enjoy reading, gardening, playing an instrument or doing one of those grown-up colouring books. Cooking a meal, having a bath or going for a run can all be mindful, as long as you focus singularly on what you're doing.

Alternatively, you can simply look for moments each day to increase awareness. For instance, on the train, take a few minutes to concentrate on your breath, rather than idly scrolling through Facebook. Or when you're walking to the office, ditch your headphones and really pay attention to how you're feeling, noticing things like tension in your shoulders.

Living more mindfully might bring up difficult emotions. You might notice the anxiety or the anger that you had been trying to suppress. But negative feelings are nothing to be afraid of. They're part of life and ignoring them doesn't make them go away – it simply makes them fester. Once you acknowledge whatever it is that's making you feel anxious, you can confront it head-on and assess the situation rationally. It's rarely as bad as you imagined.

If the idea of being mindful makes you feel silly, then think of it in another way. Psychotherapist Tina Gilbertson calls it 'constructive wallowing', and weight-loss expert Louise Parker calls it 'taking a brain nap'. Whatever you want to call it, simply becoming more aware of your feelings makes step 2 significantly easier. >>

2 ASK YOURSELF: WHY AM I DRINKING?

Often, all it takes to rob a craving of its power is simply to acknowledge it. Like a soap bubble: as soon as you touch it, it pops. Paying mindful attention to your emotions can really help you avoid stress-drinking that white wine. Ask yourself, “Why do I want a glass of wine?” Are you anxious, stressed, bored, tired, angry or lonely? If so, you know that drinking won’t help. Instead, once you’ve acknowledged how you feel, you can decide to talk to your partner/flatmate/mum about it, then go to bed early with a good book or podcast.

Being aware of your feelings helps you choose the option where you wake up refreshed, rather than the one where you drink the wine and fall asleep in front of *Gogglebox*. There’s nothing wrong with cravings, and you can’t get rid of them, but you can change the way you respond to them.

Of course, if you’re feeling festive and happy, then go for it! A clear way of looking at this is to decide if you’re going to look back on this drink with joy or regret. If it’s joy, then have that drink – just be sure to enjoy it mindfully (more on that in step 4). If it’s regret, then you need something to short-circuit that craving, which is where step 3 will help.

3 PLAN SOME DRINK-FREE DISTRACTIONS

Once you’ve identified that you want to drink to numb a negative emotion, then you can stop the craving with a distraction. “It’s what we call dealing with discomfort, or surfing the urge,” says Willoughby. “Your brain is like a petulant child. It will say, ‘I’ve had a hard day so I deserve it’, and another part of your brain will say, ‘But your goal is to be alcohol-free today’, and it will escalate: ‘But I really want one!’ So you need to break that internal dialogue very quickly with a strategy.”

It could be running around the block, having a bath or a snack, calling a friend, watching a beauty tutorial on YouTube, dancing around your kitchen to Carly Rae Jepsen (just me?)... Find what works for you and make a list that you can refer to when that craving hits. Having



“Having ways to distract yourself will help you break the **HABIT** of regularly opening a bottle of **WINE** at home”

coffee meditation in which you mindfully spend five minutes with your drink. “Really notice your coffee: the colour of it, the flavour, the heat. Focus only on your coffee. Make it special,” he says. “Doing this with a drink that isn’t alcohol takes the pressure off, and then you’ll be imprinted when you do drink alcohol.”

It doesn’t have to be coffee – you can practise this with any soft drink. Then, when you do decide to have that alcoholic drink, you’ll be able to fully appreciate every sip and won’t mindlessly throw back more than you intended.

5 MONITOR YOUR PROGRESS

Research has shown that monitoring habits helps improve them. This is why people who want to lose weight are advised to keep a food diary, or those who want to save money should keep a record of their spending. “Monitoring or reflecting on your drinking can encourage you to moderate it,” says David Crane of UCL’s Department of Behavioural Science and Health. “Most people have a sense in their mind of what an acceptable level of drinking is, and they may be unconscious to that most of the time, so what self-monitoring does is bring that to consciousness.”

Ultimately, it all comes back to awareness. Being mindful of how much you’re drinking, and why, will make better choices happen naturally. 

Mindful Drinking: How Cutting Down Can Change Your Life by Rosamund Dean is published on 28th December (Trapeze, £12.99)