

DRINK LESS, MEDITATE MORE?

Even casual drinkers are giving up booze for a month, a year, or forever in a movement that combines mental and physical wellness.

MELISSA HOWSAM talks to two mothers of the movement.

"I BELIEVE our ability as humans to be conscious and aware of ourselves resides in the prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that separates us from the animal kingdom. This is also the part of the brain that houses our higher self," says Annie Grace. "You could argue that the prefrontal cortex is where our relationship with the creator is best realized and felt. And alcohol damages our prefrontal cortex."

When she was in her 30s and responsible for C-level global marketing in 28 countries, Grace was imbibing almost two bottles of wine a night. She set out to regain control. "I shared a PDF of my writing and research in 2014, and it went viral," she says. "People started writing me letters from all over the world, and I decided to self-publish my findings into the book *This Naked Mind*."

Grace's viral text fueled Ruby Warrington's own choice to put down the bottle. "Somebody gave me the book in fall 2016," Warrington says. She recounts the onset of her journey: "I needed a way to describe my experience of reevaluating my relationship to alcohol," she adds, "which had meant questioning—or getting curious about—every impulse, every invitation, and every expectation to drink." The result was a book, *Sober Curious*, that gave a name to the movement.

Grace notes that according to the CDC, 90 percent of excessive drinkers aren't chemically dependent on alcohol. And she adds, "for many, the idea of total abstinence is not only unnecessary, but possibly harmful, as it does not allow one to explore mindful drinking, or occasional sobriety." Thus, the movement—call it sober curious, call it mindful drinking—is not necessarily forever abstinence.

For Grace, who lives with her husband and their three children in the Colorado mountains, the "best advice is to be exactly that: *curious*," she says, noting how, often, our planned breaks



from alcohol come with preconceived notions about the drawbacks: how difficult it may be, how we'll miss it, how much harder it will be to socialize. But "when you put your ideas aside and approach the break as an experiment," she says, "allowing your feelings to be whatever they are, you often surprise yourself."

As far as where to begin, it may seem obvious, but, for British-born, New York-based Warrington, it's worth restating: "To get the benefits of not drinking you have to ... stop drinking!" she says. "I recommend 100 days minimum to really have the full experience." From there, she suggests that any time you choose to drink, be conscious of the why: "What do you want to feel less of, or more of?" She notes. Ask yourself how else you could yield the same results sans alcohol, and, eventually, "You will find you



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don’t ‘need’ alcohol at all.”

“The goal,” adds Warrington, “is to encourage each individual to work out what is right for them, as alcohol affects each of us differently.”

Warrington plays on the buzzy term FOMO (fear of missing out) with FOMA (fear of missing alcohol) to convey the panic many feel about socializing (with friends, family, colleagues, dates, etc.) without booze. “It shows how much we have come to rely on alcohol as a social lubricant,” she says, “and the only way to overcome it is to feel the FOMA and [abstain] anyway.”

“Living without a mechanism to numb emotions can be intense,” admits Grace. “But it’s such a gift, as our emotions are our guide to the areas of our life that need care and attention.” But any number of replacement tools, she notes, can aid in managing stress, from exercise and nutrition to sunlight and meditation. “We overcomplicate this,” she explains, “looking for the easier way. But, really, if you get exercise, get outside, eat whole foods, and spend some time building your brain through meditation, you do wonders for your stress levels.”

Case in point, Grace, though currently alcohol-free, doesn’t identify as sober. “My go-to phrase is ‘I drink whenever I want to, and I haven’t wanted to in five years now,’” she quips. (Grace’s mocktail go-to is quite simple: soda water with a splash of cranberry and fresh squeezed lime. “It’s delicious,” she says.)

Warrington, similarly, does not self-describe as sober and has taken no vow of abstinence, but “the more time that passes, the less desire or need I have for alcohol,” she says, “to the point I rarely even think about it these days, let alone take a drink.”

For Warrington, this apparent shift in consciousness “is a logical next step in our wellness revolution.” She even

names alcohol “the new cigarettes,” predicting, “it will become more and more socially unacceptable to drink.”

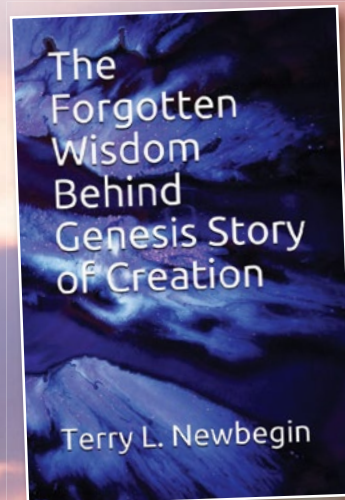
“As we live in the future—most point in human history,” Grace says, “we are on the leading edge of human evolution, and this is apparent in our consciousness around health and wellness.”

She notes the paradox that exists in us as we teeter-totter between organic nutrition, fitness, yoga, and meditation ... and frequent imbibing. “Something inside of you starts to feel incongruent,” she says. “And the whisper that something is not quite right gets louder until we pay attention. I think we are at a point in human history where, when it comes to alcohol, we are starting to pay attention.”

Perhaps this mindfulness is a sort of spiritual calling. When asked about the potential connection between spirituality and sober curious, Warrington notes how consuming alcohol is sometimes in response to a spiritual urge to connect to something bigger than us, something that exists outside of our every day.

Grace hosts the podcast *This Naked Mind* and runs programs like The Alcohol Experiment, found at alcohol-experiment.com. For her, the future of sobriety is, in a phrase, “mindful drinking—where we’ve taken the personal responsibility to become fully informed about what we put in our bodies, including alcohol, and make a well-informed, mindful decision.”

Grace thinks that level of mindfulness will drastically reduce the alcohol intake of society as a whole. “I believe there will be a larger, and more public, nondrinking group in society,” she says, “[and] that it will be as common and accepted not to drink as it is to drink today. We will, in the future, see the fact that we thought it was weird not to drink as ludicrous.” **S&H**



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