

# SMARTdaily

The Courier Mail

Making life better

FRIDAY, FEBRUARY 4, 2022



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# Drink and be wary

## HOW TO TELL IF YOU ARE A FUNCTIONING ALCOHOLIC

### HEALTH

JOANNA HALL

**Y**ou're successfully juggling a career and a personal life. You're great at your job, keeping your partner happy, and a terrific parent. You feel entitled to a glass of wine every night, or a nightcap to get you off to sleep. You have everything under control, so there's no way you could be overusing alcohol – right?

Many fans of the Sex and the City reboot, And Just Like That... are contemplating what constitutes too much drinking while watching Miranda Hobbes drink more than usual while adjusting to changes in her life. Her behaviour fits the definition of a "high-functioning alcoholic"; someone who's dependant on alcohol, but appears to suffer few external consequences.

### IT'S COMMON

Dr Stephen Jurd, a specialist addiction psychiatrist, and co-founder and chairman of The Sydney Retreat recovery centre in Sydney, says "alcohol dependence is shockingly common".

"To quote the College of Surgeons website, each week on average, more than 100 Australians die, and more than 3000 are hospitalised as a result of excessive alcohol consumption."

According to the national 2019-28 Alcohol Strategy, one in four Australians drinks at risky levels, and alcohol is the most common drug of concern for people accessing specialist treatment (data from 2017-18) accounting for 35 per cent of episodes.

Many of us have survived the Covid-19 pandemic by drinking more than usual.

In May 2020 an Australian Institute of Health And Welfare poll reported that one in five people admitted to increased alcohol use during the pandemic. Of these, almost half had one-to-two drinks extra per week, 28 per cent had three-to-four drinks extra, and females



DR STEPHEN JURD

## Red flags for alcohol abuse

- Believing you have complete control over how much you drink.
- Failed attempts at cutting back.
- Being sensitive to comments about your drinking habits.
- Drinking alone rather than socially.
- Feeling guilty about your drinking.
- Lying about how much you've drunk.
- Personality changes when you drink.
- Becoming hostile or argumentative when you can't drink.
- Not being able to stop at one drink.
- Regular blackouts.

Sources: thivalistsobriety.com and drinkwise.org.au

were also drinking more than males for reasons including increased stress.

### WHAT IS STANDARD?

The National Health and Medical Research Council alcohol guidelines recommend that healthy men and women should drink no more than 10 standard drinks a week, and no more than four standard drinks in one day.

"Those limits are in place because we know that anything above that starts to be accumulative when it comes to increasing people's risks," says Dr Christian Rowan, a specialist physician in addiction medicine

with The Banyans Healthcare Group and St Andrew's War Memorial Hospital in Queensland.

Drinking too much puts you at an increased risk of a long line-up of health issues, from liver damage and cancer, to depression and anxiety. There's also a greater risk

of trauma from car accidents, falls, drowning, and domestic violence.

### HIDDEN ISSUE

Life below the surface for a high-functioning alcoholic isn't always rosy. While some are unaware they have a problem, others struggle in dangerous silence even if friends and family are aware something is wrong.

"It is an insidious illness that slowly entwines itself around an individual's choices, friendships, social life, career



Lucy Quick says she had a toxic relationship with alcohol.

**“Alcohol was holding me back from living up to my values as a person, or even knowing what my values were**

choice, attitudes to self and others,” says Dr Jurd.

Lucy Quick, a certified life coach and CEO of Thivalist, knows this all too well. The Melbourne mum-of-two, age 38, had an epiphany on Boxing Day 2018 after a drunken fight with her family and being banned from using Uber.

"From when I first started at 14, my drinking was problematic and often involved blackouts, bad decisions and many regrets," she

admits. "I kept drinking for two decades because I believed it was just what people did."

Lucy drank to deal with emotions including stress from unhealthy work environments to post natal depression.

She never woke up wanting a drink, and didn't consume booze every day, but her relationship with alcohol was toxic – something even becoming a mum didn't change.

"I wasn't being the best mum, wife, friend, daughter or sister because of alcohol," she says. "Alcohol was holding me back from living up to my values as a person, or even knowing what my values were."

Lucy quit drinking and educated herself about alcohol. She also became a certified life coach and co-founded Thivalist, a global community, empowering and inspiring sober-curious women.

"High-functioning women often neglect themselves as they focus on

juggling everything in their lives, which leaves them feeling strung out and reaching for a quick fix to feel better," she says.

"They become stuck in a vicious cycle, and often the only way out is a rock bottom moment, which drives them to get help."

### WHERE TO FIND HELP

Dr Rowan says the first thing a person should do if they think they have a problem is to talk to a loved one, and see a GP to have their drinking assessed.

"If you notice that you're drinking more than usual, try stopping for a few weeks or a month, or set goals such as no drinking at lunch time," adds Dr Jurd.

"But if you find yourself struggling to hit your goals, or you're sneaking in a drink during the 'stopping time', then it's likely you may have a problem, and you should seek professional help."