

London's hidden drinking problem

Worried that your seasonal excess could become a problem habit? You're not alone, as **Chris Moss** discovers. Photography **Rob Greig**

It was only a Tuesday and I wasn't going out, so I had a large vodka and hibiscus juice (it's what was in the fridge) before dinner, a bottle and a half of wine (lots of red, less of the white) with it and, with a coffee afterwards, a small but generous glass of brandy. I shared this, so you can halve the wine intake. On a Saturday you could throw in another bottle of wine, at least.

Most days are like this. A booze-free day is a rarity. On my way home from work I sometimes sense an oncoming Pavlovian desire around 6pm. According to Edmund Tirbutt, author of self-help book 'Beat the Booze', I'm pretty normal – but I've got a problem. 'You have what many people have – a psychological addiction. The classic symptoms are drinking at set times and putting drink before other things.'

Tirbutt distinguishes between this widespread kind of alcohol dependency and 'physical addiction', when drinkers experience withdrawal symptoms if they try to give up. 'It's no good just cutting down if you're physically addicted,' he says. 'Your brain has changed. Physical addicts just have to stop, for good. That's not to say psychological addiction isn't a serious problem.'

Like many anti-alcohol campaigners, Tirbutt is a reformed alcoholic and a teetotaler. 'I had a terrible drink problem when I was at university. I was good at writing and acting, and if you're good at that, it usually means you're not good at anything else. Everyone used to laugh at me for being myself. That forced me to drink too much; by the age of 28 I might as well have killed myself.'

Tirbutt gave up and moved to the country with his wife – co-author of the book and another teetotaler – and claims life is much better now. 'I've never come across a single case – and I'm sure there isn't one – of someone giving up drinking and not being happier than they were before they gave up,' he says.

Stats

73% of men and **57 per cent** of women drink at least once a week.

13% of men and **7 per cent** of women report drinking every day.

20% of school pupils aged **11-15** reported drinking in the week prior to the interview.

24% of women are 'hazardous drinkers' (regularly consuming 15-25 units a week) while **33 per cent** of men are 'hazardous drinkers' (22-50 units a week).

43% of people in 'managerial and professional' households exceed the daily limits on their heaviest drinking day of the week.

Source: NHS, 2009

So, I ask him, if I regularly – well, always drink more than the government-recommended safe amount (21 units or 14 small glasses of wine a week for men, 14 units or nine to ten small glasses for women), does that make me an alcoholic?

'I avoid that term. I think the word "alcoholic" can act as a convenient shield for people to feel they haven't got a drink problem. People see a tramp and think: At least I'm not an alcoholic. Even the tramps think they're not alcoholic. Everybody can always think of an argument as to why they aren't really an alcoholic, because there's no real definition. Far better to admit you have a drink problem and deal with that.'

London certainly has a drink problem. The NHS 'Statistics on Alcohol: England' dossier for 2009 reports that of 863,300 alcohol-related admissions to hospital (2007-08) 102,000 of them were in London.

Health problems associated with hazardous drinking (see box, left) include accidents, vomiting and passing out, anaemia, gout and potentially fatal diseases such as liver cancer and cirrhosis.

So why doesn't all this put us off drinking, or make drink a taboo in the way drink-driving is and smoking increasingly is? According to Tirbutt, a lot of it's to do with the liver: 'The problem is that, unlike other organs, your liver has very few nerves and doesn't give out pain signals till it's too late – till you've got cirrhosis, basically. Of course alcohol can harm you in a hundred ways, but if people aren't going to worry about getting breast cancer or pancreatic cancer or cirrhosis, they're hardly going to worry about lesser illnesses.'

We're drinking more than past generations did, but we're also drinking in a different way. A graph produced by the Department of Health shows UK alcohol consumption to be at the same level it was in the early 1900s. The key difference is that beer consumption has dropped and beer

replaced by wine. Between the 1930s and late '60s, the level stayed at around half of the current figure – so from rationing through to the hippy generation, our parents and grandparents found other forms of entertainment. We are, then, the new Victorians in more ways than one: the stats suggest the late '70s – and the arrival of Thatcherism and a new ideal of consumerism – may have led us down a copop alley.

Here in the capital we have a special set of circumstances that can make us drink more, depending on class, type of work and ethnicity. 'London is different in that it caters for many markets,' says James Kneale, a historian of drink and drunkenness at University College London. 'A lot of people work in the "knowledge economy" – journalism, advertising, PR – and in the City. A lot of what they do is networking, which occurs in bars.'

Kneale also points to a new trend in the way young people drink. 'Clubbing has changed the nighttime economy. The way people drink is much more "up for it", they are looking to get extravagantly drunk. Drinking is much more planned than it was when I was going out in London in the 1980s. Now young people "pre-load", getting drunk before going out. It is a much more ambitious night out.'

But I think the over-thirties have found an equally 'ambitious' way of getting hammered. After Christmas last year, I had to carry a cellar's worth of full plastic bags to the bottle bank at my local supermarket. There we all were, the middle-class, red-eyed revellers, proudly dropping empty bottles into the hairy tubes in the name of planetary love and moral righteousness – while our kidneys burped and our livers farted and our brains rang out the bad tidings of another hangover.

I am, like many London adults, a full member of the new sort of private club: the living-room lizard lounge. About 90 per cent of my drinking takes place at home, and under the gaze of an understanding partner – that is, a drinking partner – and sympathetically alcohol-loving friends. No one ever judges me.

According to an academic paper, 'Sainsbury's Is My Local', by Sarah L Holloway, Mark Jayne and Gill Valentine, 'Harmful domestic drinking, unlike public binge drinking, remains a normal, unremarkable, unproblematic practice in the eyes of many.' That's why they don't make sensationalist documentaries about home-based winos, preferring the caricature of provincial towns where working-class boys and girls engage in the more obvious expressions of inebriation.

Drinking less: 70's 12 steps

- 1 Cut down gradually.**
- 2 Replace booze with exercise or a new hobby.**
- 3 Don't drink alone or when anxious or depressed.**
- 4 Aim for three booze-free days a week.**
- 5 Change your routine – ditch the TV, get up earlier.**
- 6 At least try alcohol-free beer.**
- 7 Keep an eye on it with a drink diary.**
- 8 Avoid drinking in rounds.**
- 9 Eat liver-cleansing foods such as quinoa and couscous.**
- 10 Accept you'll see changes in your sleep pattern.**
- 11 Be prepared for sabotage from friends and family.**
- 12 Don't punish yourself if you relapse a bit.**

So here comes January – a month of bingeing on exercise. Of reformed sinners. Of failed projects. It's almost so obvious to give up vices that you don't feel like bothering. But Tirbutt says the first month of the year can be used as a useful ritual. 'If you are able to give up each year without experiencing withdrawal symptoms, you can be sure you don't have a physical addiction. Being dry for a few weeks each year will also give your liver a valuable opportunity to repair itself.'

'There are, though, two things I'd advise. One, don't just stop; give up gradually, so if you're drinking five pints a night, go down to four, three, two, one. Secondly, if you're pretty sure you have a problem, either see your GP or phone one of the health lines before giving up.'

Tirbutt enthuses – in the book and in person – about giving up completely, and not for moralistic reasons. 'I've talked to all sorts of people who'd given up drinking themselves, and what surprised me was the number of experts, particularly on the NHS side, who believed in just cutting down. But there is absolutely no doubt that it's much easier to give up than to cut down – it's better for your self-esteem, your head is clearer, you are better at all the things you do. Once you've given up for a year or two, it just becomes automatic.'

I'm really not sure what I'll do in January. I sort of agree with a journalist colleague who said: 'Yep, drinking is a problem, but so are other things in my life; it's a problem I can live with. I like a drink.'

Kneale believes there is hope for Londoners. 'The traditional pub has suffered from competition from new superpubs and from cheap home drinking, but good pubs encourage responsible behaviour and are neighbourhood institutions.'

London, more than any other city, has lots of traditional pubs as well as gastropubs, bars, restaurants with drinking areas. Good pubs are good for sensible drinking, and so is variety.

'Not every pub is welcoming to strangers, but they are still real "public houses", places to get out of the rain, sit down and relax, meet people or find work. Research carried out for the Institute for Public Policy Research found that the pub is the place where people are most likely to meet people from a different social background, and it's been estimated that the average pub raises about £3,000 a year for good causes.'

So, it may be the pubs – and London's dazzling diversity – that prevent us from falling into the abyss of alcoholism. I'd drink to that.

If you need advice or help, call Drinkline (0800 917 8282) or Frank (0800 776600).