

My new chapter

'I ditched the booze and became an alcohol-free coach'

Sandra Parker, 54 (below), gave up a 25-year corporate career to become a certified alcohol-abuse coach. Here, she talks about her own personal struggles with alcohol and explains why setting up her own business to help others is one of the most rewarding things she's ever done.

I was on a sailing holiday in a remote part of Asia six years ago when I first noticed I had a real problem with alcohol. There wasn't a lot of alcohol available where we were, and when drinks were being passed around one night, all I could think was, "hurry up!". The next day, hidden away in my cabin on an amazing boat with a massive hangover, I kept thinking about how I'd wasted a whole day of my five-day trip. Later, I decided to never let that

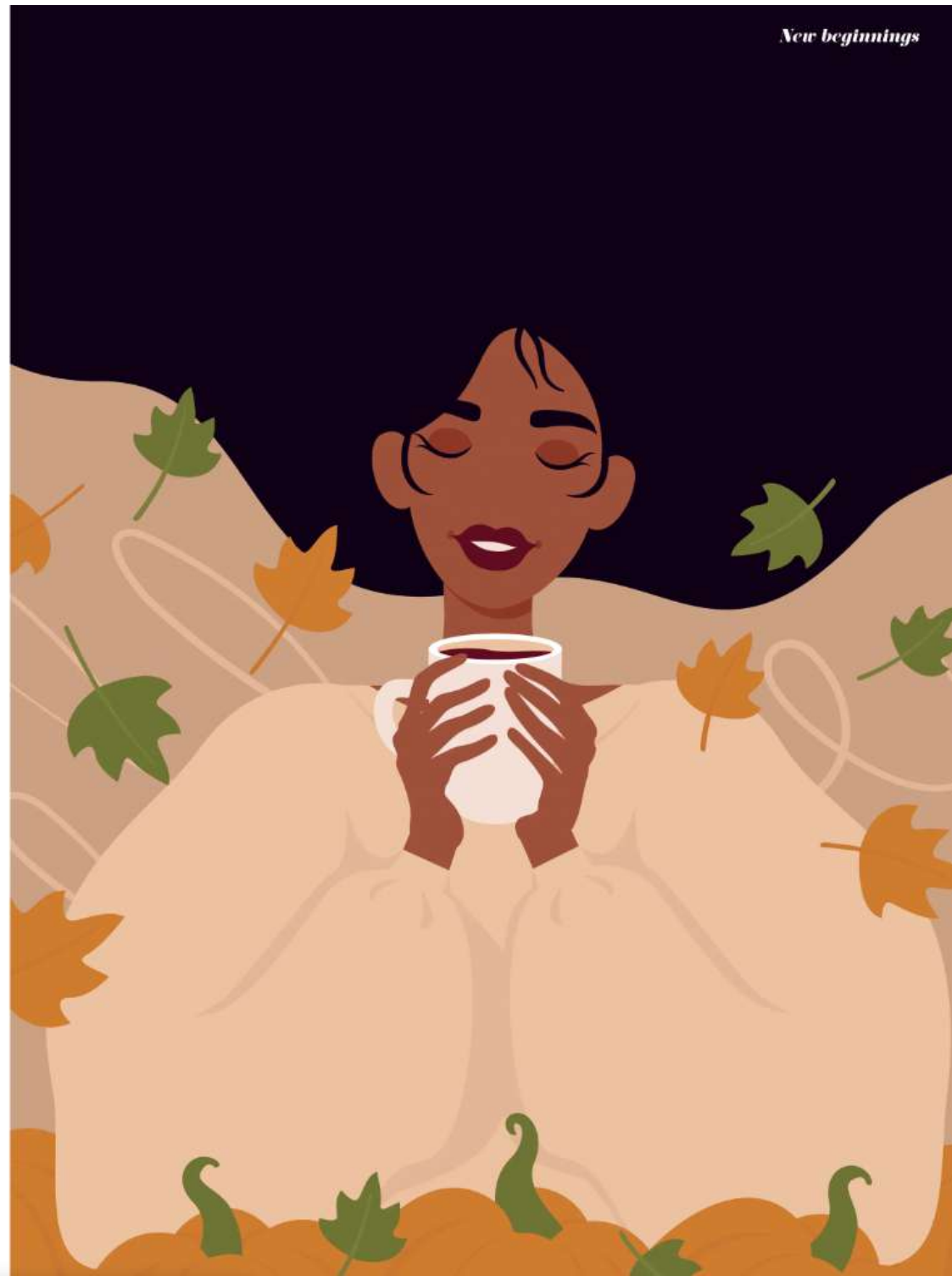


happen again, and so began my journey to sobriety.

Until that moment, I'd always thought my drinking habits were normal. As a chartered accountant, I had moved from Scotland to London in my early 20s to work in investment banking and had enjoyed the work-hard-play-hard culture. But looking back, I can see how alcohol slowly became a constant in my life.

As my lifestyle changed and I did a couple of courses in wine

WORDS: JOANNA EBSWORTH, IMAGES OF SANDRA: ELIZABETH KEATES FILM & PHOTOGRAPHY.



Alcohol: the female factor

Around 95 per cent of the people I work with are women. Many are consuming one bottle of wine every night, and the shame they feel means they are living double lives, sitting up late after their children and partners have gone to bed to conceal their addiction. Just because you're not sitting on a park bench drinking, and you haven't been arrested for drink driving, doesn't mean you don't have alcohol dependency.

An increasing number of women in their 50s are coming to me because they've started to think more about their health. Reaching menopause can sometimes be the final straw because dealing with that and drinking on top of it isn't conducive to getting a good night's sleep, avoiding burnout, or leading a happy, fulfilled life.

If you're not sure whether you have an alcohol abuse issue or not, the question you need to ask yourself is: "am I in control?" And by that, I mean, can you decide how much you are going to drink and then stick to it? Can you say, "I'll only have one drink" and then not have three or four, even if you've had a stressful day or you're celebrating something? If you can't, you're not in control. And the earlier you can acknowledge this to yourself, the easier it will be to act.

I never immediately take alcohol out of a client's life because that only leads to more stress, misery, and feelings of deprivation. Instead, we tackle the root cause of what it is that makes them want to drink in the first place, then gradually reduce their intake at a pace that works for them, all with a huge amount of daily support from me and the online community.

'I never planned on going sober, but was shocked by how good I felt'

in 2018. I was shocked by how good I felt, but there was still a part of me that wanted to go back to drinking because, back then, it felt like abstaining from alcohol made you weird according to British culture. Thankfully, things are better now.

After a month of sobriety, I extended it to three months, and then six. Around the six-month mark, someone asked me what we should do to celebrate my one-year anniversary, and I heard myself saying, "I don't think I'm going to drink again".

CHANGING FOCUS

After that, I took some courses on life coaching, human behaviour, alcohol, and the subconscious mind, then set up my own alcohol-free coaching business called Just the Tonic. I worked on it part-time, but when Covid hit, I realised there was a massive need for help. So, when I was offered voluntary redundancy after a company restructure, I took it and started coaching full-time in 2020.

It felt very scary to walk away from my professional qualification and give up the well-paid career I'd built up over 20 years. Going from knowing exactly how much I earned every month to experiencing huge fluctuations wasn't easy, and I had to work on my mindset to manage the initial anxiety I felt. I worked with a fabulous business coach and had a couple of other people I confided in, but I made a conscious decision not to ask anyone else for advice because I knew deep down this was something I really wanted to do, and I needed to strengthen my beliefs and confidence to make it work.



tasting, the vodka and Red Bulls got swapped for espresso martinis and Californian Chardonnay. Working in a predominantly male environment, I also felt a lot of pressure to work long hours and keep up with my colleagues at social networking events – something that's very hard to do when you're only 5'4" and 8 stone.

At some point, I realised the hit I got from alcohol was also spiralling my stress levels. Even worse, the thought of having a night out without alcohol made me feel deprived and uneasy.

By the time I hit my 40s, I was trying to lead a healthier lifestyle: I'd taken up yoga, run a marathon, cut processed foods from my diet, and practiced meditation regularly. But I'd still turn a blind eye to my alcohol consumption. I wasn't drinking every night, and I never, ever intended to get drunk, but every so often I drank way more than I planned or wanted to. I'd wake up the next day feeling physically awful and even worse mentally, and my hangovers were starting to feel like the panic attacks I'd suffered when I was younger. I experienced waves of regret and shame, and I couldn't bear to feel like that any longer.

SEEKING HELP

Once I got back from that sailing trip, I spent ages searching for help to reduce my drinking. I knew I didn't want to do AA (Alcoholics Anonymous), because I didn't relate to anything they said and their approach was very stark. While other methods focused on moderating your alcohol intake with a soft-touch approach.

I knew neither would work for me, so I started working with an amazing life coach who helped me get control over alcohol by working on my emotions, my anger management, and my understanding of what I was trying to numb through drinking. I also worked with a large group programme, and very much "one size fits all". Ultimately, I took different elements from each approach and started doing the work by myself.

I never planned on going sober, but once I'd learned other ways of dealing with my emotions, I decided to take a 30-day break from alcohol

There was a lot of uncertainty around the time I was setting up my business during the pandemic, but what I do now is much more rewarding'

A NEW CALLING

There was a lot of fear and uncertainty around the time I was setting up my business because it was during the pandemic. I knew it would be very easy to feel afraid, and so I guarded my mindset carefully. It wasn't always easy, and I did have times in the first year where I worried about my finances, but I never regretted my decision. Seeing the results my clients were getting consistently gave me a lot of confidence to know I was doing the right thing and that my business was going to do well.

Working in a corporate job, my workdays were often stressful, partly because of deadlines but also due to office politics and not having full control over decision making. What I do now is much more exciting and rewarding. I get to work with a variety of people from different backgrounds, and I consider it a huge privilege that they share with me their challenges, concerns around alcohol, and the impact it's having on their lives, as well as their hopes and dreams. Helping them to rebuild their self-esteem and regain control over alcohol is the biggest thrill and it's very rewarding.

No two days are the same now. Each day, I'll have a mix of individual client calls and group calls, and I also spend time answering messages and posting recordings in our group chat. I have an assistant who helps me with most tasks, including scheduling emails, managing my diary, and answering any admin or technical questions, and I catch up with her two to three times a week. I do have to be disciplined to make sure I exercise and take regular breaks,

and schedule in some downtime, but it's amazing to be doing something I am so passionate about.

I also spend time every month looking at what else my clients need. I have a small mastermind group that supports clients who have completed my transformation programme and I continue to help them gain mastery over being alcohol-free and further upgrade their lives.

Over the past few months, for example, I have attended a workshop in the US and have been working with a breathwork coach and a holistic nutritionist to develop training for my mastermind clients.

Doing this work makes me feel like I am living my purpose. I know that might be an overused expression, but helping high-achieving men and women get freedom from alcohol – and seeing someone light up when they describe the difference my programme has made to their life and the impact the change has had on their family – is incredible.

My job doesn't feel like work to me, and it would be an understatement for me to say I'm glad I changed careers. Without a doubt, it's one of the most exciting and rewarding things I have ever done in my life – and I am just getting started!



Sandra Parker is a certified alcohol-free coach. She founded Just the Tonic Coaching in 2019 to help high-achieving professionals gain freedom from alcohol and live a healthier, more fulfilling existence. Find her at justthetoniccoaching.com or at [instagram.com/justthetoniccoaching](https://www.instagram.com/justthetoniccoaching).

