

# Being 'dry' is not the same as being sober

FIRST PERSON

Dry January reminds me I don't have the luxury of quitting booze for a brief spell, Jordan Kawchuk writes

The first month of the year sheds its December hangover and re-emerges as Dry January. Worldwide, millions swear off booze for 31 days, stoked by their self-restraint and heightened sense of health.

And I watch it play out. With mixed feelings.

My social-media feeds fill with photos of pimpled-out virgin Caesars and work-out selfies hitched to lines like "giving my liver a break!" Posts are garnished with #dryjanuary, like a maraschino cherry dropped in a Shirley Temple.

And when Dry January wraps up, celebrations erupt online as people cross the finish line, exhausted from their marathon of abstinence. Finally. We did it.

Me? I have the other 234 days to carry out. And the year after that. And the next year. But I'm not bitter. I just can't drink like a normal person.

Today, if I touch the stuff, it no longer puts me in the doghouse. It delivers me directly to the hospital or to treatment via a path of destruction. Let's just say I'm allergic to the stuff.

When humans are allergic to things (say, like peanuts), they avoid them. But those afflicted with this liquor thing have brains that tell them they still want and need what they're allergic to.

It has nothing to do with being a lush, a lack of willpower, or moral failure. It's complex. It's insane and it sucks.

Alcoholism is a medically verified bio-psycho-social-spiritual disease; meaning it lives in the brain, makes the body dependent, hijacks healthy life-work-love, and douses the soul's connection to itself.

But it doesn't have to derail life if managed properly. It can be a hidden pebble in your shoe that you learn to walk with, slips and all.

I'm not begrudging the Dry January graduation announcements. That makes as much sense as a diabetic getting angry at Instagram cupcakes.

It's just that Dry January reminds me that being dry is not the same as being sober.

Being dry is simply not drinking. Being sober is adopting an entirely new set of thoughts and actions.

Being dry is all willpower and white knuckles. Being sober is finding meaning and connection, because while being dry is temporary, being sober is a lifelong endeavour.

Being dry changes beverages. Being sober changes everything.

Going to war against an addicted body

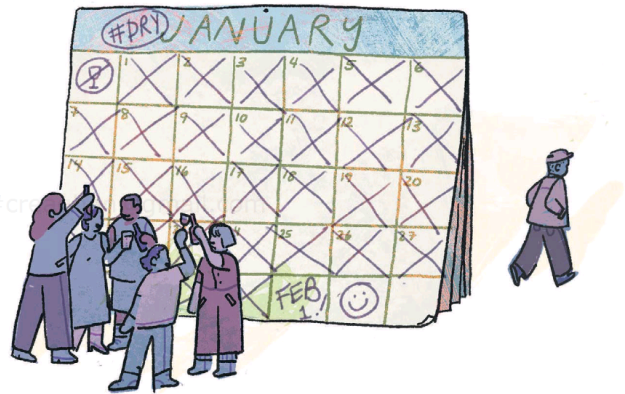


ILLUSTRATION BY MARLEY ALLEN-ASH

and mind is hard work. But reinventing yourself is also wickedly fun and wildly rewarding.

Sobriety isn't all church basements and bad coffee – it's a chance to play all the notes in life you long forgot.

Today is a relatively friendly time to be sober. The stigma is shifting and openness about addiction is almost commonplace.

Sobriety is fashionable with millennials and Gen Z-ers, who espouse abstinence in dry nightclubs and festivals. Young people reject hooch culture with the same distance I had with my parents' generation smoking in airplanes.

Bookstores are stocked with as many sober-curious books as self-help bestsellers. Chatty, confessional recovery podcasts are ubiquitous. The Recovery Guy is a stock character in every other TV series.

Celebrities now speak about sobriety unabashedly. Brené Brown, Bradley Cooper and Ben Affleck are among thousands of red-carpet recovering alcoholics who openly share about their disease. Musicians like Jason Isbell make cool and credible songs about the struggle.

It's no wonder people want a break in January. I applaud them for stepping away, even for 31 days. At my bottom, I couldn't get through a single morning – sweating and shaking until the stores opened. But that's a much darker essay.

And in every second coffee shop I sit in, I overhear a couple of alcoholics deep in conversation around recovery lingo. We knowingly nod to each other – anonymous, but not really.

Did I follow alcohol or did alcohol follow me? Was it a romantic pull or a series of set-ups?

In high school, I lived inside the jazzy, drunken lyrics of Tom Waits (before he got sober). I constantly quoted the movie *Barfly*, and later, like most white university boys in the arts, I thought I had personally discovered Kerouac and Bukowski.

During this time, a friend gave me a job in a wine boutique. Then I became a wine rep. One year, I was the Summer Cooler Guy and drove around with flats of free samples (one for you, one for me).

Later, I made my career in the television industry that stocks its fridges with beer to keep contractors editing late. I directed food, music and travel shows

where it was normal to drink on the job.

There's more. I helped write and produce an indie film with "beer" in its title. I toured with a martini-themed swing band. Every night, a tub full of free booze.

These ridiculously linked liquor experiences didn't cause my condition, or even condition me – circuitry and psyche can take a bow for that. But they must've planted some fermented notion of alcohol somewhere in me.

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Dry January reminds me I don't have the luxury of quitting booze for a brief spell, as if taking a hiatus from Netflix or Haagen-Dazs. January is a stern warning that the month doesn't matter.

Sobriety is tough, but not a grind. It comes with insights I wouldn't have received if I didn't go through the journey from shipwreck to shore.

Jordan Kawchuk lives in Duncan, B.C.

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