

# With intergenerational addiction, how much chance did I have to avoid alcoholism?

---

**JUSTIN BOURNE**

SPECIAL TO THE GLOBE AND MAIL

PUBLISHED YESTERDAY

UPDATED 2 HOURS AGO    February 11, 2023

*Justin Bourne is a former pro hockey player and coach, an NHL analyst for Sportsnet and host of Real Kyper and Bourne on Sportsnet 590. He is the author of the new book Down and Back: On Alcohol, Family, and a Life in Hockey.*

While I waited for my teammates (and roommates) to wake up, I had the thought for the first time: “Boy, it feels like I enjoy drinking way more than everyone else. That’s not good.” I didn’t process the question I was developing about myself: “Might I be an alcoholic?”

We were on the tail end of a seven-day bender at the close of the college hockey season and the constant partying had worn the boys clean down. While my three roommates napped away the middle of the day to alleviate the previous night’s sting, I went to buy bottles of booze that were meant to be “gifts” to my pals. It told them we had another party night ahead – a reality that was met with groans – and provided me with insurance that people would continue to drink with me. It’s the first time I remember manipulating circumstances to ensure I could get drunk again.

Although I was a 24-year-old senior in college, I was a relative rookie when it came

to alcohol. It had never been a big part of my life. For three years of junior hockey, I didn't drink. My dad, Bob Bourne, won four Stanley Cups in a decorated career with the New York Islanders and his personal challenges with addiction were not fully visible to me as a child, since he left our family when I was 8. My mom isn't one for more than an occasional glass of wine. My inexperience led to an unspoken fear of how alcohol would affect me as it became a more regular part of my routine.

Spoiler alert: It turns out that if your father is a Stanley Cup champion, and also an alcoholic, you stand a much greater chance of following in his footsteps down one path than the other. Just a few years after I began drinking as a freshman, I found myself the ringleader among a group of guys who could stack cups of booze that would dwarf Lord Stanley's mug.

What had changed internally, to eventually lead me to a month-long stay at the Renascent treatment facility in downtown Toronto?

As an adult, I watched my dad's battle with all its dramatic peaks and crashes. At the same time, I was losing my own footing on the slippery slope into an alcoholic lifestyle. The decline into the pit of despair was long and gradual, but it had begun. Ironically, I could barely stand to be in contact with him during the worst of his struggles as I was inching toward losing my own son, with my wife approaching her wit's end.

In those moments, when my life as I knew it hung in the balance, I found myself wondering how I had ended up there. Had my own experiences been different at an earlier age, would that have helped? Had I had no chance in avoiding alcoholism?

I often find myself reverting to a single word when I consider my own condition: "activation." Many young people have their first experience with alcohol in a way that allows them to gradually learn their limits. Then there was my path, which

was stone-cold sobriety followed by funnelling beers at college parties. Quite simply, it wasn't a healthy transition: The more situations in which you put a person where there is intentional drinking to excess, the more opportunity and risk there is in activating something within.

The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism has summed it up thusly: "Recent research also reports that 50 to 60 per cent of the risk for alcoholism is genetically determined, for both men and women. Genes alone do not preordain that someone will be alcoholic; features in the environment along with gene-environment interactions account for the remainder of the risk."

They call alcoholism "genetically complex," given the combination of nature and nurture necessary to foster the condition.

I have no doubt that I was genetically predisposed to becoming an alcoholic. I also have no doubt that the lifestyle of a professional athlete allowed me to find scenarios where drinking, often to excess, was celebrated. Before long, I had triggered something within me that was always there.

If I had practised moderation earlier, would my relationship with alcohol be different? I'm skeptical. I don't know that when we start drinking is as important as how we start drinking. Yet, I'm grateful that my experience came later in life. It allowed my brain to fully develop (which early alcohol use can inhibit) and allowed me to know myself sober. When I returned to sobriety, I wasn't a fish out of water.

How to stop the cycle of intergenerational alcoholism is a problem without a clear solution, but that doesn't lessen my determination to guide my children on moderation and to inform them of the risks. I'll tell them what I believe about excess and activation. We can't change what we pass on genetically to our kids, but with the lessons learned from my life – and my father's – I may be able to steer my kids in a different direction, in the hopes of finding a different outcome.