

By John C. Ayers

## My last drop

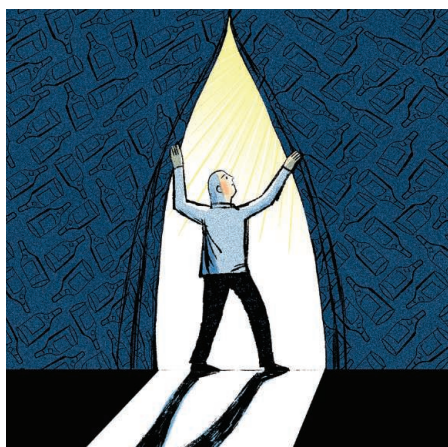
was looking back in my diary, trying to find clues to why I was struggling with severe insomnia. I had just begun to take new antidepressant medications, and something wasn't right. I'd experienced insomnia before, and now I saw the common thread. In both cases, my psychiatrist had started me on new medications and had recommended that I temporarily stop drinking alcohol. Suddenly it hit me: The insomnia was a symptom of alcohol withdrawal. I was a functioning alcoholic. It was the wake-up call I needed, and I've been sober ever since. But now I worry that others, facing the stresses and sadness of the pandemic, may be starting down a similar path. Here's my cautionary tale.

Alcohol had long been a respite for me. During high school and into college, I drank heavily to cope with anxiety. Part of me knew this wasn't a healthy approach, but it seemed to work. When I discovered a love of geochemistry, I eased up on my drinking. On weekdays, I chose to study rather than go to the bars. I still enjoyed drinking on weekends, but it was social drinking—nothing I was concerned about. Throughout grad school and my early years as a professor, I still sometimes drank too much. But it didn't cause problems.

That started to change roughly 11 years into my faculty position, when my father died. Devastated by his loss, I began to suffer from depression, which in turn led to weight gain and sleep apnea. I became chronically sleep deprived and could no longer think clearly, which made it challenging to meet the intellectual demands of my job. I suffered from a short temper and strained relationships. I started to self-medicate with alcohol, which reduced my anxiety in the short term. But eventually I became so depressed that I no longer tried to restrain my drinking. I took up mixology as a hobby and started to drink cocktails every night.

Years passed, and I still felt deeply unhappy. I decided to see a psychiatrist, who began to treat me for chronic depression at first. It took me several more years to recognize I was an alcoholic.

An important clue came one morning when I awoke after an awards dinner at a conference feeling so hungover I wasn't able to co-chair a session that morning as planned; I had to ask colleagues to go on without me. I had vowed not to drink too much. But my anxiety got the best of me. After multiple bottles of wine were placed on the table in front of me, I started to drink heavily, the conversation distracting



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me from realizing how much I consumed. Afterward, I was frustrated and confused by my lack of control, but I wasn't quite ready to admit I had a serious problem.

That changed a few months later when I looked back on my diary and finally, with the help of my psychiatrist, named my problem. I immediately committed to abstinence. The first 6 weeks were especially hard, but I got through them by exercising regularly and spending time with my family. I was fortunate that I was on a sabbatical at that time, which gave me space to focus on my health and recovery. I started to practice mindfulness and meditation and attend Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. I also took time to learn about a new scientific

discipline and start a new collaboration, which got my creative juices flowing again and helped me rediscover my thirst for research.

Now, nearly 10 years later, I live with less stress, have healthier relationships, and am happier and more productive. I still suffer from anxiety, but I find that regular exercise and meditation help me cope. When I attend conferences—at least, when I used to do so in person, before COVID-19—I avoid alcohol-centered events or decline the free alcohol tickets. Occasionally, I get odd looks from colleagues, but they quickly understand when I tell them I'm a recovered alcoholic. No one I've confided in has made me feel bad.

If you're one of the many people who are currently struggling in the midst of the pandemic, take it from me: Alcohol may make you feel better temporarily, but it's not a healthy way to cope with stress and anxiety. Ask for help instead. ■

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# Science

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