



Wasted

Increase in frequency, binge drinking among women causes for alarm

By [Carla Iacovetti](#) 03/12/2015



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In today’s vastly changing society, where women are no longer taking a back seat in education, career equality and in life, women are also experiencing some serious side effects of high-pressure living — alcoholism is on the rise.

According to a 2013 study by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), American women are drinking more heavily than ever before. Nearly 14 million women (1 in 8) in the U.S. binge drink about three times a month, and women average six drinks per binge. The study was based on a survey of approximately 278,000 U.S. women aged 18 and older for 30 days prior.



“It is alarming to see that binge drinking is so common among women and girls, and that women and girls are drinking so much when they do,” said Robert Brewer, M.D., M.S.P.H., of the Alcohol Program at CDC, in a press release.

Further, the Federal Bureau of Investigation reported that the number of women arrested for drunk driving has increased by 30 percent since 2003, and part of this statistic includes alcohol-related deaths. Contrariwise, DUI arrests among men dropped by nearly 17 percent nationwide taking it from 780,000 to 650,000.

In the recent book of award-winning former journalist Ann Dowset Johnston, *Drink: The Intimate Relationship Between Women and Alcohol*, she reveals some concerning statistics. “Excessive drinking is the third leading cause of preventable death in the United States. It is responsible for roughly 23,000 deaths of American girls and women each year.” Blaming both psychological and social factors in the workplace, Johnston not only discusses the rising problem among women, but also reveals her own battle with alcohol addiction and her road to recovery.

Once a high-profile Canadian senior journalist and public speaker, Johnston was also a single mom. She and her husband divorced when her son was only 5 years old, pushing her into full throttle as she juggled a fast growing, high-pressure writing career while trying to meet the many needs of her growing son.

This story is not uncommon in today’s society, especially as women have come center-stage in the professional, corporate world. With the glory of these prestigious careers, there is also the high stress that

accompanies this kind of success — stress that becomes hard to manage when *also* trying to tend to the needs of a family.

“This is global: The richer the country, the fewer the abstainers and the smaller the gap between male and female consumption. The alcohol industry, well aware of this reality, is now battling for our downtime — and our loyalty. Wines with names like Girls’ Night Out, MommyJuice, Mommy’s Time Out, Cupcake, and yes, Happy Bitch, plus berry flavored vodkas, Skinnygirl vodka, mango coolers, Mike’s Hard Lemonade are all aimed at us,” Johnston wrote in her book.

No doubt women have come a long way, but with this advancement there is a lot more pressure to perform. The stress levels for many high-powered women are at an all-time high. According to the Cleveland Clinic, an academic medical center rated one of the top four hospitals in the United States by *U.S. News & World Report*, “Women are more susceptible to stress. Over 70 percent of married women with children under the age of 18 are employed outside the home. Sociologists describe women as struggling to achieve the ‘male standard’ at work, while trying to maintain the perfect wife and mother standards at home.”

Ventura County resident and famed former screenwriter Stuart Birnbaum is currently the program director for The Lakehouse Drug and Alcohol Rehab Center located in Westlake.



Stuart Birnbaum

“It’s generally acknowledged that stress is a primary trigger for relapse, especially with recovery, and it’s actually the cause of most substance abuse across the board,” he said. “There are some societies that have built into them other ways to address stress, but we’re definitely not one of them. There should be more yoga, meditation and breathing,” Birnbaum said.

Through the ’60s, the media portrayed smoking as cool, sophisticated and sexy until cancer came into the mix. While advertisers now have to insert a warning message on everything related to smoking, we now have booze advertisers sending out a message of *safe drinking*. *Sex in the City* was a huge promoter of

women drinking while they enjoy the *good life*. There is a normalization of drinking portrayed in the media and we are seeing effects of this everywhere.

“We’re the addicted-to-more generation,” Birnbaum said. “People need to understand that alcohol is a fast-acting drug. I make no distinction — it’s a drug, and those that are addicted, are addicted to ‘more.’ Whether it’s smoking pot, taking prescription meds or drinking, addicts have an inability to either drink or fix their feelings with any kind of control. Once they start, they cannot stop.”

Dr. Dy Wolpert, founder of the DyLo House, a prominent holistic health care treatment center in Oxnard for men and women suffering from fear, depression, anxiety and all forms of addictions, believes that fear is a big issue.

“Women have a lot more pressure than men, not to mention the unrealistic expectations that have been placed on women over time — societal norms that have been somewhat dormant until the last decade. Fear is one of the biggest causes behind women drinking; it’s the culprit. Stress is a factor, but when stress becomes unmanageable, it produces high-anxiety,” Wolpert said.

There is no doubt that alcoholism and any type of addiction is invariably symptomatic of what is going on inside with a person. “Understanding that addiction is a symptom of something else is a simple premise. Indeed, addiction doesn’t just come out of nowhere, and it can get complicated,” Birnbaum said.

“No one becomes an alcoholic overnight. Like anything else, it develops over time. It’s about pain. It’s about the past. It’s about need and desire. It’s about disappointment. Triggers are out there. When anxiety happens, people want instant relief. Alcohol is an instant drug. Remember the movie *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*? Brick is only interested in drinking to find peace from pain that click in his head. ‘You waitin’ on that click ... it’s like a switch clickin’ off my head. Turns the hot light off and the cool one on and all of a sudden, there’s peace.’ They will keep drinking to into a stupor and it feels better than the pain,” Wolpert said.

There are a variety of reasons people turn to alcohol for pain relief, and according to Birnbaum, “Genetic disposition doesn’t mean that a person will become an addict. Currently, one in every five people in this country has a family member or someone they personally know with an addictive behavior issue.”

It is not only career women who are falling prey to the lure of alcohol. This is affecting women of all ages, including women over 60, especially divorced women who are experiencing the pangs of loneliness. “A lot of women are battling alcoholism at an older age, and there are numerous reasons for this,” Birnbaum said. “However, it’s highly important that we keep in mind the fundamental causes behind alcohol addiction: stress, depression and also untreated and undiagnosed psychological issues, which usually breed self-medication. If something is undiagnosed, a person cannot get medication, so alcohol is a legal drug, but it can be deadly,” Birnbaum said.

Angela J is a 48-year Ventura resident and recovered alcoholic. She started drinking at 15 for kicks. “Most of my immediate family were drinkers, and they had a lot of weekend parties. My relationship with my mother was troubled; in fact, my grandparents mostly raised me, and I had a lot of pain. When I was

in seventh grade, I remember taking bottles of Thunderbird to school and hiding it in my locker. Alcohol helped me bury the pain and make me into someone else, and worse still — lo, a family member actually provided the alcohol for me. It all came crashing down at 15 when I got caught drinking at a school carnival,” Angela said.

Angela missed a lot of school days because she would go to the park and drink. The day she was caught, she was stumbling and staggering. She was kicked out of school as a result. “I started working at 15, and by the time I was 16, my mother forced me to pay for rent. At 17, I met a guy. We drank a lot and did a lot of drugs together, and then I got pregnant and the crazy vicious circle began,” Angela said.

Sharon Wilsnack, Ph.D., has an extensive background in substance abuse research and therapy, which includes a 20-year longitudinal study of drinking behavior of women in the United States. The National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism and the National Institutes of Health have funded Wilsnack’s research continuously since 1980. She is currently Chester Fritz Distinguished Professor in the Department of Clinical Neuroscience, University of North Dakota School of Medicine and Health Sciences. Wilsnack is very concerned with the increase in high-risk drinking in women (binge drinking), which is drinking a lot of alcohol over a short period of time, and death is the most concerning of the risk factors.



Sharon C. Wilsnack

“Binge drinking has become a very common term for heavy episodic drinking. There is no such thing as spacing drinks out. This is very typical with younger women. The young women now know how to drink to get drunk. High-risk drinking increases acute risk, which includes negative consequences like alcohol poisoning and even death,” Wilsnack said.

“Typically, I don’t like the term ‘binge drinking,’ because it is usually done over a couple of weeks, but the binge drinking that is related to high-risk drinking or drinking to complete intoxication is on the rise,” Wilsnack said.

From 1981 to 2001, Wilsnack was involved with a research study that examined binge drinking. It found the overall amount of drinking to get inebriated was steadily increasing during those 20-plus years.

Angela drank to get inebriated. Drinking for her was not a social outlet. Her daughter spent much of her time in her bedroom playing with toys, or Angela would send her to grandma's house so she could drink. "When my daughter was 5 years old, I couldn't stop throwing up. I thought it was a hangover, but I ended up going to the hospital and discovered that I had an inflamed pancreas. I was told I wouldn't live long if I continued to drink. For a brief moment, I was really scared, but continued drinking my beer. In fact, it got worse. Instead of bingeing on the weekends, I drank daily," Angela said.

Drinking excessively is not just psychologically addictive, it is damaging to one's health. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), alcohol enters your bloodstream as soon as you take your first sip. "Alcohol's immediate effects can appear within about 10 minutes. As you drink, you increase your blood alcohol concentration (BAC) level, which is the amount of alcohol present in your bloodstream. The higher your BAC, the more impaired you become by alcohol's effects. These effects can include reduced inhibitions, slurred speech, motor impairment, confusion, memory problems, concentration problems, coma, breathing problems and even death."

There are other health concerns that go along with excessive, long-term drinking. In fact, according to the NIAAA, the list includes the following: cardiomyopathy (stretching and drooping of the heart muscle), arrhythmias, stroke, high blood pressure, alcoholic hepatitis, fibrosis, fatty liver and various forms of cancer (mouth, esophagus, breast, throat and liver).

"Some studies show that women are more susceptible to physical complications as a result of excessive drinking, and one of the greatest risk factors is breast cancer, because alcohol raises estrogen levels," Wilsnack said.

Angela never married her daughter's father, but they continued to party together and once again, she found herself pregnant by the same man. Her drinking continued, and her children watched her deteriorate. "My drinking led me to fights, falling down and getting hurt at all hours of the day and night. I could not concentrate, so I couldn't work. I collected welfare and disability for many years. Because of the raging temper that I developed, my family members continued to enable me because they were afraid of me," Angela said.

When Angela's daughter turned 18, she got pregnant and gave birth to a baby girl. After her granddaughter was born, the baby's father told Angela that he did not want her around his house or his child. Her daughter supported his decision, telling Angela, "You either stop drinking or you will never see your granddaughter. This was a huge reality check for Angela — she was devastated.

Angela's reality check played a major part in her recovery. She had to say goodbye to old friends and made the decision to deal a final blow to this demon. "I made a vow to God and myself that my kids would never see me drunk. I chose change, and I did this on my own. I started volunteering. I began living for my kids and my grandkids. I started going to church on Sunday and became a greeter. I surrounded myself with positive people. I lost a lot of party friends as a result, but I have my life back. I

have been able to be present in my grandchildren's lives; my relationship with my children is completely restored. My faith has been a very stabilizing factor in my life and I am so grateful," Angela said.

In today's society, socializing in bars has become the accepted norm. Rehabilitation centers are now a part of our lexicon, where years ago they had a negative connotation. Today, people treat going for rehab as a part of normal everyday life.

While treatment is extremely important, it is also paramount that one choose wisely when looking for a rehabilitation center or getting into a 12-step program. "Choosing the right program is an issue. I believe there should be a guide for choosing the right treatment center. They need to carefully shop around. There are places that are simply recovery mills. A person can go in for 28 days, get a certificate, a pat on the back, and then they go home and start drinking again. Rarely do those programs work. Anyone is able to be compliant within the defended walls of the castle, but unless they're prepared, they will not win the battle." Birnbaum said.

Prototypes Women's Center has been nonprofit since 1986 and the center opened in Ventura in 1999 and was developed to address the needs of women. It is a residential treatment facility with a psychiatrist on staff. Vel Linden, the program manager at Prototypes, says, "With addiction, relapse is more the rule than the exception. So we like to work with them and inform them about relapse. We focus more on coping tools, and helping them learn to cope when they are not in a treatment facility."

"Go to at least six different groups. Find the right group for you. While the steps might be similar, each recovery group has a different personality. The important thing is that you do something about addiction. Recovery is possible," Linden said.

There are many support groups here in Ventura County, from Alcoholics Anonymous to various state and private programs such as Genesis Outpatient Programs, La Ventana Treatment Programs, The Miracle House, Narcotics Anonymous, Ventura County Behavioral Health Adult Services, Sunlight of the Spirit Women's Sober Living (SOS) and Villa Kali Mai, to name a few.

Prototypes has a resident psychiatrist and a drug and alcohol counselor on staff. "There are big differences between male and female dependence. The fact that women are more emotionally-driven often times makes it harder for them to break free from addiction. Alcohol addiction is no respecter of age or socio-economic status. In treatment, there is no difference where the emotional aspect is concerned. Also, the amount of women dealing with alcohol addiction has significantly increased over the last 20 years. When I started with the center 15 years ago, we didn't see anything like what we are seeing today," Linden said.

Factors like, long-term stress, trauma, the break-up of a family, emotional and physical abuse, socioeconomic stressors are some of the reasons women turn to alcohol. "If a woman is married or has suffered a break-up, the whole family needs to be educated," she said. "Even if one person is being identified as the alcoholic, many of the family members may have an issue. The family as a whole needs to learn how to recognize the triggers for relapse and understand how they can be supportive of their loved one in treatment and recovery. This is not just an individual disease. It impacts families and

communities and it takes all of us working together to support the healing from addiction,” Linden said.

Angela drank from the time she was 15 to age 36 without a break. She finds the fact that she has a healthy, vibrant life today incredible. Instead of going to the beach with a bottle, she goes and meditates. She exercises regularly and hopes that her story can somehow help others.

“It was hard. I didn’t have anyone and I did this on my own. If I could turn my life around and stop drinking, anyone can. If you look hard enough, there are answers to be found. If you seek, you really will find,” Angela said.

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You have to want to stop before you can.

I feel a great deal of sympathy for addicted people. It becomes your world, all you think of, and all you want.

Horrible.

Having said this, you women asked for it. You want equality, you got it. Along with all the stress and BS all of us men have had to put up with for oh so many years.

You think it was easy going out and slaying a mammoth? Pish, I would rather wipe drool off of juniors chin than get gored or stomped.

posted by **sslocal** on 3/13/15 @ 02:51 p.m.

You're 100 percent correct sslocal. Nothing changes without our willing it to happen first. I feel much the same. I haven't known very many with addiction issues, but the few times I have been close to it, it's so horribly painful for the addict and the person on the other end of their mania. It is absolutely horrible.

I also think you have a point. Women have wanted to play with the big boys, and now that it's happening, they're getting reamed. It's quite sad.

posted by **WriterAtTheSea** on 3/17/15 @ 08:40 p.m.

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