How to make dry January stick

Cut down
Stop for a bit
Quit
Stick

by Laura Willoughby MBE
I wish I could have done just a month off booze. But for me the longer I went without drinking the more I realised that my lack of an ‘off’ switch would make it impossible for me to go back. But we are all different. Club Soda’s aim is not to tell you what to do but to empower you to discover the right solution for yourself.

Making the decision to take a break from drinking, committing your time and money to it, and trying to make changes and learn more about your relationship with alcohol, even if you didn’t do everything 100% perfect, is more than many people ever do.

But after a month it can be easy to forget what got you started on this journey to begin with. So it is worth giving yourself some time to reflect. Look at any data and notes you have kept about your personal experiment. Why you liked drinking, as well as why you wanted to take a break. Has your mood, weight, finances or energy improved? Have you found a favourite non-alcoholic tipple? Have you gained confidence in saying no to a beer in the pub?

You may have slipped. How did that make you feel? Do you feel you need a little longer to get into the swing of things? Oh so many questions...

Let’s see if we can help you answer them.

Laura Willoughby MBE

Club Soda helps you change your drinking whether you want to cut down, stop for a bit, quit, or stick.

We bring everything you need in one place. Set your goals, track your progress, join the community, find useful hints and tips, enjoy inspiring events and workshops.

joinclubsoda.co.uk

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The MOB is our online programme to get you through a Month Off Booze.

Daily emails, webinars, video check-ins and tools to track your progress.

You can do it in your own home, in your own time, or join others for our live online MOB three times a year: January, May and October.

joinclubsoda.co.uk/the-mob

We are growing our programme of workshops and events to meet demand - so do keep a look out.

How to Quit Drinking

How to Change your Drinking

0% beer tasting and Craft Soda Tastings

the MOB Bootcamp and more.

joinclubsoda.co.uk/events
Forgotten how it felt?

There's an interesting exercise we've done in some of our workshops: it is to write down all the good things we get from drinking. This is not a difficult task, and it doesn’t take long to come up with a long list of things, from relaxation to enjoying the taste of a nice wine. You may wonder why we’d do such an exercise, if we’re talking about reducing our alcohol consumption?

Well, it is to acknowledge that things aren’t black and white. Alcohol can bring good things (as well as bad) into our life. And we can, and often will, hold conflicting views about something, this is what ambivalence is. It is good to keep in mind if and when you start thinking about all the nice things you used to get from drinking. Just remember to balance that with all the new good things you've discovered.

The second part of our exercise is to come up with non-drinking ways of getting the same benefits that we (used to) get from drinking. A long bath to relax, learn a new skill, teach your kids something, for example.

Like an actor, you need to know your motivation

One way of discovering how you really feel is using the techniques of motivational interviewing; the Club Soda online goal setting and progress tracking tools are based on them (it’s free to join, so do pop along to joinclubsoda.co.uk). This process accepts that some ambivalence is natural, but also recognises that if it remains unresolved it can be a barrier to change.

You cannot beat ambivalence just by being told over and over again how much better off you will be. We are far too stubborn to accept that. You need to recognise and ‘roll with resistance’, and explore both sides of your ambivalence. Tot up the positives and negatives of your drinking, and see if the benefits of change outweigh the benefits of not changing. You may not always feel ready to make that decision, so you may have to revisit this question in future.
Resolving ambivalence

It isn’t true that there is nothing good about alcohol at all. If there wasn’t, it wouldn’t be so popular. But that doesn’t mean that it doesn’t also cause real harm, at least for some people.

At Club Soda, we are big believers in our members’ ability to decide for themselves. We are never going to tell you how much or how little you should be drinking. Most likely you already know that, or if not, we can help you find out. We do recommend that you try things out though. Take a month (or three!) off booze and see how you feel. Then, during and after your month, take stock: What is different? What is better? Is anything worse now?

You may want to use a simple template to do this. First, look at your life if you (1) stay the same (go back to your drinking before your trial sober month) or (2) change for good (cut down, stop for a bit longer, or quit). Then consider the good and difficult things for both options. Are there more good things on one of the two options? Which one has more difficulties?

Useful books

Rethinking Positive Thinking by Gabriele Oettingen (self help).

On the benefits of goals, and obstacles in reaching them.

Blackout: Remembering the things I drank to forget by Sarah Hepola (personal story). Opening the lid on blackouts, and personal courage it takes to make peace with ourselves.

Thinking about drinking by Stuart Linke (self help)

Simple and practical, evidence-based psychological strategies for moderating your drinking.

I Don’t Drink: How to quit alcohol - a drinker’s tale by Julian Kirkman-Page (personal story). After 40 years of drinking, Julian quit alcohol forever. In this book he writes about how he did it.
Productivity

Productivity is an area of life where a longer-term plan to change your drinking may reap big rewards. Whether at work, looking after your kids, or in college, being at your sharpest and most focused will make a difference.

Club Soda member John has decided to quit booze for a year to improve his productivity. He says:

“I’m not a heavy drinker nor am I reliant or dependent on alcohol. But I do love real ale and I enjoy social drinking to the tune of about five pints on most Friday nights and give or take a few bottles during the week. I’d say pretty average for a man in his mid-40’s. So why then, have I given up something which I enjoy, but don’t rely on?

2016 is going to be huge for me. I own one business which will be taking a quantum leap next year and will be expanding geographically and I am also launching a second business. That, together with raising a family, has meant that something has had to give. And that thing is booze.

It sounds really odd, but to help 2016 be a successful year for business, I needed to focus on a personal goal. In the past I’ve given up smoking, shed four stone and apart from sleep, which let’s face it, none of us get enough of, booze was the last thing standing in my way.”
Drunk sleep screws productivity

A lack of sleep affects productivity, and it doesn’t take much alcohol to impact on your sleeping patterns. Rather than go into the rapid eye movement (REM) phase before deep sleep, you plunge into deep sleep straight away. But then, as the alcohol wears off you come out of deep sleep and enter the REM phase where you can easily be disturbed and awakened.

A normal night’s sleep will contain about six or seven REM cycles, but we often only get two of these cycles if we’ve been drinking – so we are more likely to feel exhausted the following day. You are also more likely to want to get up and pee during the night. All of this reduces your hours of good quality sleep, and make you less productive.

It gets worse with a hangover

If you are lucky, you are just exhausted from lack of sleep. But if you also have a hangover, then the day becomes even less productive. I didn’t even have to tell you this did I?

I have had terrible lethargic days with friends when I was not really taking part, but just getting through the day. I was in a job I did not enjoy, but I had no energy to get out of it, or even make the most of the opportunities it did give me. It led me to drink more and, well, you can see how that vicious cycle quickly gathers momentum.

You could think of a hangover as a mini-withdrawal from alcohol – it is after all a mind-altering intoxicant, causing changes to our brain.

Alcohol can affect the levels of both dopamine – a neurotransmitter responsible for pleasure, and GABA – a neurotransmitter that causes relaxation and a sense of calm. A hangover is the opposite of these, inducing a low mood and anxiety. As the brain adjusts its chemistry from the night before, our cognitive function is also impaired in the area of the brain (frontal cortex) that is in charge of doing more complicated things like making decisions or thinking about the future. No wonder we can’t do much with a hangover.

Anxiety or low mood, Body and muscle aches, Stomach upset, Feeling sick or dizzy, Fatigue and lethargy, Sensitivity to light, Difficulty concentrating or focusing & Lethargy.

Long-term regular heavy drinking can also cause issues that will impair your productivity beyond just the day after. It will take you longer to bounce back. It took me six months without alcohol before I really began to feel the impact on my productivity and thinking.

Cutting down or quitting drinking can create a virtuous circle. If we get more done and feel more in control at work or with our family during the day, we improve our mood and have more energy. As a result your day will be less stressful. We will feel happier with ourselves, and not feel as much like we want or need a drink at the end of the day. And not having had a drink, the next day will feel even better. And so on.
Who do you want to be?

As well as feeling lighter and clearer headed, the biggest personal benefit from changing my drinking was the energy and joy I got from reconnecting with the values I hold dear. When I was drinking a bottle of wine a day, my values and behaviours were at war with each other. Frankly that was no fun. I wish I had noticed this disconnection before, it might have helped me to kick the habit sooner.

The most obvious manifestation of this is my connection with other people. I think and am energised most when talking with others. Over time, I began to feel that I was not a people person at all. I lacked the energy to really concentrate. I was too focused on the next glass of wine, or drained by the hangover from the night before.

Once I quit drinking, my ability to concentrate on conversations increased hugely. I was energised by everyday interactions that I used to be too tired for, from a quick chat at the shop to conversations with friends. The difference this made to me, being a good old-fashioned extrovert, was amazing. I was finally living my values again.

“My values and behaviour were at war. I wish I had noticed the disconnect before.”

One way you can resolve your ambivalence about your behaviour change is to reflect upon what your personal values are. Question whether your current behaviours are aligned to those values, and who you want to be (or see yourself being) as a person.

For instance, somebody who holds ‘being a good parent’ as one of their top personal values can reflect upon how their current drinking fits with that core value. Even if their parenting is absolutely fine, does their drinking allow them to be as good a parent as they want to be? Could they have more energy to do things with their children, or more money to treat their children to days out, or more patience helping with homework, if they drank less?

Learning what your personal values are, and reminding yourself of them, can help you quit or cut down on booze – because in doing so you are able to connect situations and feelings that are difficult, stressful, uncomfortable, or challenging with something larger and more meaningful.
How did it feel?

I like to think of a month off booze a bit like a little science experiment, where you are the subject. It is why we encourage you to measure all sorts of variables in your life (even use gadgets) and update your progress on a regular basis. It means that when you get to the end of your experiment, you will have some data and knowledge on which to base your decisions for the future.

At a very simplistic level, being alcohol-free longer-term is simply a case of repeating a single month – as many times as you want. Maybe you just want to move your goalposts a month at a time. Here are some things to think about and reflect upon, if you are planning on extending your booze-break for a longer sabbatical, or for life.

Cutting down

It is hard to contemplate never drinking again. I always tell people that I am getting back on the gin and tonic again when I am 80. Many of us are not physically addicted, but habitually using and used to drinking. So it must be possible to moderate. Lots of people do.

I cannot tell you whether cutting down or quitting is the best option for you. Only you know the impact drinking has on your life. I went through lots of attempts to cut down before I finally decided that quitting was the best option for me. As I have shared before, I have no off switch, so could never keep to well-laid plans.

But just like the planning you did to take a month off, you need to plan your moderation. There are several ways you can do this. You can, for example:

- Not drink during the week
- Limit your alcoholic drinks when out
- Drink only on one night a week
- Not drink alone
- Not drink at home
- Stick to beer and wine only
- Take 3 or 4 consecutive days off from drinking (good advice for a healthier liver)
- Switch to a lower alcohol beer or wine
- Only drink when you are in a good mood

Beware of get-out clauses

- Stopping at 4 drinks when I go out at weekends – unless it’s a celebration
- Not drinking alone/at home – except when I am eating a meal with my partner
- Sticking to beer/wine – Pimms in summer or a cocktail I have not tried before
- Switching to a lower alcohol beer only if there is something nice
- Only drinking when I’m in a good mood unless we lose the Ashes/league/darts
- Not drinking in the week (perhaps only when I am on holiday).
It won’t surprise you to know that these exceptions are a danger zone. They are, in fact, reasons not to change at all. Hoping that something will magically change won’t help you moderate. Change takes effort. So to moderate you still need to plan, make rules, and do your best to stick to them.

It is important to imagine, write down, and commit to what “drinking in moderation” and “being in control of alcohol” looks and feels like to you. If you are vague about your goals, and rely on hope only, you will be less likely to succeed.

**Personalise your tactics**

From your month off you will already know a bit more about you. What times, types of occasions, or external pressures can cause you to press the “f*ck it” button and grab a glass of wine?

- Go back to our ‘Planning Sucks’ book, and use the tools there to plan how you may execute your moderation
- Don’t only decide your tactics, but also how you are going to set those goals and track whether you're succeeding
- Is there an area of your life you are still hoping to improve? Will moderating help with it? How will you see the changes?
- Are there people you may need to avoid, and do you need to find new cheerleaders?
- Do you need to create a new [survival kit](#)? For example, if you want to stop after a certain number of drinks, do you need something to make sure that happens?

**Be specific**

You can fill in some of this information on the Club Soda online goal setting page. You can keep track and it will allow you to review what you've said before. Ten questions to consider:

1. How many days per week, and on which days do you want to allow yourself to drink?
2. What will you need to do differently on the days that you will drink, to make sure you stick to your targets?
3. What situations do you want to be able to drink in?
4. When do you not want to drink? Are there certain situations or days?
5. If you do drink, how many units or drinks will you have? How will you count them?
6. How will you keep to that number? Can you imagine yourself doing this?
7. By saying ‘Yes’ to alcohol, what are you saying ‘No’ to? Even if you drink in moderation occasionally, will there be any costs? Is this worth it?
8. Do you trust yourself to be flexible on the above rules, or will you need to stick to them completely?
9. What will you do if you slip up? How do you make sure you get back onto you plan?
10. How long will you give your moderation plan before you stop and re-evaluate whether it is working?
Your daily routine becomes even more important

When you were taking a month off, carving out time and space to plan and commit to how you’re going to get through the day without a drink is very important.

When you are moderating in the longer-term, you still need to plan the day and the week ahead, based on the rules you have set yourself.

**Commit** to having either an alcohol-free day today, or visualise your night out moderating and how great it will be. Not only think about how good you will feel, but how you will make sure you keep to your rules, what are your strategies? How will you reward yourself?

**Review** the day ahead for possible pitfalls, when you might be thinking about alcohol, or when your commitment to a set number of drinks might begin to waver (“well it is Mary’s leaving do, maybe just a few extra drinks tonight…”). Weed out the get-out clauses.

**Replace** by making a plan to do something different if pitfalls or cravings arise. Remember to update and use your survival kit.

**Commit** to the plan, and imagine yourself doing it. There are so many possible ways you can avoid, control or escape situations that might interfere with your moderation or alcohol-free commitment.

**Your biggest enemy is alcohol itself**

You may find you are more successful sticking to your planned days off alcohol than your cut down plans on the days you plan to drink. Because once you have started drinking, alcohol hits your pleasure centres and you will want more to keep that happy feeling. You are also more likely to be swayed by friends or the sense of occasion once you have started having a good time. It is what alcohol does so well.

If you are hoping to cut down some nights of the week, your coping strategies will need to be cast iron and carefully thought out, to compensate alcohol impairing your decision-making. You can tip the balance the other way by:

- practicing **refusing a drink** early on, so it seems less strange later
- asking your friends to help, you don’t have to be part of a round
- taking out less money, or only just enough for the drinks you plan to have
- bringing your own non-alcoholic drinks with you (see Rebel non-drinking)
- film yourself on your phone repeating your goals, nip to the loo and watch it
- reminding yourself what you want to do when you get home or in the morning.
Quit or extend?

You will still need to plan if you are looking to extend your dry January into a dry February or even longer, or to quit permanently. Some of the tactics you put in place may have only been temporary, and could be hard to sustain for the long-term. There may be people, places, and things you won’t be able to avoid for ever.

There may also be pitfalls you may not yet have encountered. Summer, holidays, weddings, or a really stressful period at work can all throw up new dangers. So take some time to reflect on what you learnt over your first sober month:

1. What changes did you make during your drinking break that you want to continue?
2. What improved and what didn’t? Is there anything in your life you hope will improve if you stop for a bit longer?
3. Do you feel confident that you can do this, are there any particular areas or times when you felt less strong?
4. Are your weeks staying the same? How can you adapt your daily routine?
5. Do you need some new things in your survival kit to keep you going?
6. Will you go to the same places with the same people as you did when you were drinking, or do you need to modify your social life in some ways?
7. Which of your friends will continue to support you? How will you deal with the ones that are less supportive, now that you have a month under your belt?
8. If you have a slip-up, what will you do? How will you get back on track?

Practice makes perfect

Like everything in life, you won’t always get it right first time. Consider this a learning process about what works for you and what doesn’t; or another stage in your personal experiment. After all, the aim of doing this is to change your life in a positive way. So remind yourself often about why you are doing this. So good luck. Whatever your plans are going forward and do keep in touch with Club Soda for more useful resources.
“We get pissed together. 
So why should we get sober alone?”

by Laura Willoughby MBE
Editor Cassie Gibson

with pints of help from Jussi Tolvi, 
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