




Empty spirits

As Christmas approaches and the pressure to drink increases, Syreeta Lund reports on police officers who found that drinking was taking over their lives.

 When police interviewed a witness in a gruesome murder investigation, they offered him a stiff drink, a glass of scotch. But when he turned it down, Sarah, a Met officer at the time, would be the one to take up the offer.

Government figures estimate that one person in 13 is dependent on alcohol in Britain – double the figure for other forms of drugs.

Sarah, who worked in various departments at the Met, describes how she developed a dependency on alcohol for her sense of self, and how, instead of her controlling the drink; it began to control her.

'As the years went by, the need for alcohol grew stronger,' she explains.

As an officer who worked in police departments where the drinking culture was a tradition, Sarah, whose name has been changed to keep her anonymity, would often drink socially with colleagues.

'When I went out with colleagues from work, they would know when to go home and stop drinking, I would just carry on. I would be the first at the bar and the last one to leave. I remember being pleased if I missed my train because it would be a chance to go and get a drink in a station bar.

'I would catch the 'vomit commit' from the station and would black out on my way back; I would often wake up miles from home and have to get a cab back.'

She added: 'The first drink does the damage because it is never enough. Some people could just have a drink and leave it, I would drink to oblivion, people would stop drinking if they were sick, and I would just carry on.'

Her drinking rarely crossed over into her work, she was a 'functioning alcoholic', who carried out her job professionally.

On the surface, she was extremely successful and confident but this was only the tip of the iceberg, underneath she felt a great deal of worthlessness.

No-one knew how she felt, but a drink would fill the gap and make her feel okay, until the next morning when the feeling would be worse, a feeling of guilt and shame.

'As far back as I can remember I had a feeling of a lack of self worth. Before I even remember picking up a drink I had this feeling. Alcoholism has nothing to do with alcohol; it's a symptom of an underlying illness – dis-ease with one's self.

'I had a sense of fear that I was not good enough. The drink replaced these feelings. When I drank and it went down my throat, I felt complete, I felt less vulnerable.'

When she began her career in the police service during the 1970s, she said it was a different world.

'The fact that women were not really valued at that time in the same way only added to

my feelings of a lack of self worth. I'm not blaming the service, but this just plugged into my own insecurities.'

Over the Christmas period Sarah would be the first one to offer to work the whole festive period - a forced respite from the drinking. This way she could assure herself that she would not be tempted to drink; one was never enough.

Even when friends made the odd comment on her drinking habits, she would dismiss it by justifying it to herself saying, "if you did the job I do, you would drink".

During the mid-1990s an incident at work triggered a panic attack and Sarah began hyperventilating and thought she would die. She was taken to hospital and kept in for three days. A blood test revealed she was drinking too much.

But it would be an article she read about a homeless alcoholic who picked himself up, alongside a presentation by AA (Alcoholics Anonymous), while she was working as a police officer that would later prompt her to seek help.

'I was arrogant at the time, perhaps because of my profession I could not admit I was an alcoholic, I had to deal with drunks and did not see myself as one.'

But some time after the presentation, she began to recognise her own behaviour and phoned her contact up to tell him she thought she 'might have a problem'.

'I went into an AA meeting and was told to keep quiet and listen to other people, learn their stories and how they managed to stop drinking. The idea was that I could gain strength and hope and I would learn from their experiences, and I did.

'I sat there, in that meeting, and the penny dropped. The only person who could do anything about it was myself.'

Sarah is now 54 years old, has been recovering for 13 years and feels she is a happier, healthier, and a more rounded person through joining AA, a decision she found tough as a police officer.

As a member of AA she cannot be called by her real name. A basic principal that the organisation is founded on, is one of anonymity. This is the idea that the name of a person, their status, background or celebrity is not important.

'What it [AA] has given me is inner peace, I was in turmoil with myself, AA teaches me about humility and realising that I was self centred and it taught me to let go, to have a bit of grace and compassion and not to be judgemental.

'I really don't miss alcohol now, I feel a lot better in myself. I can have an orange or a water if I am thirsty, I just feel blessed. I can say from the bottom of my heart, I am forever grateful to AA; they saved my life and saved me from myself.'



Light at the end of the tunnel

When Clive Chamberlain was asked if he had black-outs as an alcoholic, he replied, 'Yes, the whole of the 1980s'.

Although it may sound like a joke and he is well-known within the Federation for his sense of humour – the facts were true.

Now chairman of the Dorset federation, he has been a recovering alcoholic since September 21st 1989. It is a date which stands out in his mind.

He has chosen to speak out about his alcoholism to let others know that there is 'life after booze'.

'The longer I have been without a drink; the more I realise how much of an alcoholic I really was.'

Mr Chamberlain, who began his career as a police officer in Dorset, started drinking, as most people do, during his teenage years.

He drank from the age of 16 to the age of 29 before he finally came to terms with the fact he had a problem.

'I got to the point where I hated my own guts. I felt permanently guilty. I always felt like an alien who had been deposited on the earth, looking in at everyone



Clive Chamberlain

else, I didn't feel like I fitted in and drink made me feel complete.

'Whereas people I call 'earthlings' who just drink normally feel slightly tipsy and out of control, when I drank I felt in control.

'It's a disease of the mal-content and when I took a drink it relieved the symptoms. I drank in order to be able to function. It gave me confidence, I did not have otherwise. It is quite insidious in that way, it creeps up.'

A myth about alcoholics is that they drink in the morning and throughout the day; many can go for periods without drinking any alcohol.

'I was very reluctant to give up. I would do everything I could to avoid giving up, I would reduce the

number of units taken, but then I wouldn't drink for a week and I would have all my units in one day. I was a binge drinker.

'Some people drink because they are sad and want to feel happy. I remember drinking and being happy so I wanted that to continue and would drink more.'

Again, the culture at the time in the police service meant Clive could keep drinking and colleagues would not necessarily recognise there was a problem; he himself did not recognise he had a problem until the end of the 1980s.

'Alcohol is socially acceptable and, traditionally, the police service has kept the drinks industry well serviced,' he says.

'I remember speaking to a taxi driver, saying he had lost everything through alcoholism and being so arrogant that I didn't recognise that I was going through something very similar, fortunately I didn't lose everything. Later on I thought about what he said and only then did it strike a resonance.'

He recalled how the festive season became bizarre as he spent Christmas Eve drinking during the day and buying presents in the evening, but would not realise what he had bought.

'One year I went out at Christmas and bought present for my 89-year-old grandmother. As she unwrapped it, I discovered I had bought her a bicycle pump, that's how bad it was, I had no idea.'

He added: 'I just thought, 'I have to do something about this'.

Mr Chamberlain attended a local 12-point plan meeting [See box] and after his first time managed to cut out drinking. He says he has been a recovering alcoholic ever since.'

He married in 1989 and has since had three children aged 11, seven and four.

'Fortunately, my children have never seen me have a drink.'

'The reason I am speaking out about alcoholism is to let people know that there is life after booze. If anyone thinks they might have a problem, they should try controlling their intake and they will soon realise if they can't go without it. Now I don't feel I need booze to complete me.

'I believe that since I stopped drinking, I feel like a human and have restored my dignity.'

The 12 Steps of Alcoholics Anonymous – those who attend aspire to the following:

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol – that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a power greater than ourselves to restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God [or a higher power] as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly ask Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had spiritual awakening as the result of these steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practise these principles in all our affairs.

NB: The word God is used as a reference to a 'higher being' rather than the Christian use of the word.

What is AA?

The organisation describe themselves as: 'A fellowship of men and women who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism.'

AA, founded in 1935, is also an informal society of more than 2,000,000 recovered alcoholics.

AA is a free service and meetings are run every day and night of the week in all areas throughout the UK

If you feel you would like help or more information call the 24-hour AA helpline on: 0845 769 7555. The number will be answered locally will be able to provide details of open meetings, or put you in touch with a local liaison officer, who can give you information about other facilities available.