

The message in a bottle

By Paula Goodyer
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Heavy-drinking women can nip their problem in the bud through the mail, writes Paula Goodyer.

Somewhere between the severely dependent alcoholic and the moderate drinker lies a grey zone occupied by the 30 per cent of Australians classed as risky drinkers, many of them women. They may not be dependent on alcohol and they may not drink daily, but they regularly consume above the low risk drinking levels - no more than two standard drinks daily for women, and no more than four for men.

Far from being in the gutter, they are often educated and employed, like Stella,* a 45-year-old public servant who regularly drank eight to 10 drinks a day at weekends and three to five on weekdays until she began waking up with "blackouts" - gaps in the memory that are signs alcohol is affecting the brain.

"I'd know we'd had a dinner party the night before, but I couldn't remember actually eating dinner," she says. "It was scary."

Worried, she went looking for advice on the internet and found a controlled drinking program that has helped her slash her alcohol intake. Unlike abstinence, still considered the best option for most dependent drinkers, controlled drinking programs use cognitive behaviour therapy to help drinkers learn healthier drinking habits.

Research has found that 50 per cent of people who try a controlled drinking program can bring their alcohol intake down to low-risk levels, while the rest usually significantly reduce their drinking. Six months after starting the eight-week controlled drinking by correspondence program, run by the Australian Centre for Addiction Research at the University of Sydney, Stella has only one or two drinks on most nights, with a limit of four on Saturday - her "big night". Two days a week are alcohol-free.

"In most treatment programs for alcohol abuse, women make up 7 to 14 per cent of clients, but in this program it's 60 per cent," says Associate Professor Sitharthan Thiagarajan, the centre's director. "I think what attracts them is that they can do this program by correspondence - they don't have to go anywhere to do it. Most people don't want to go to a group and tell their life story, especially if they're working or have kids. This is a way of taking treatments to people's homes, including people in rural areas, and using their own resilience to make changes."



Girls just want to have fun...but too much drink is harmful.

While the ages of women in the program range from 18 to 70, most are in their early 40s, often married or in a relationship, and employed.

"They don't see themselves as alcoholics, and I think they're right. They're not necessarily stressed out, bored or lonely either. Alcohol is just a habit - they finish work, come home and start drinking. If they drink from a cask, which isn't transparent like a bottle, it's hard to see how much they're drinking."

The program, which will also be available through the internet next year, teaches people to drink less, and drink more slowly. "This gradually reduces their tolerance so they can get the same effect from two drinks as they do from 10 - it's much better for the brain," Thiagarajan says.

"I'm drinking less but still enjoying it - it only takes one drink for me to feel an effect, whereas it used take four," says 50-year-old Jo,* a Sydney caterer whose nightly habit of four to six vodkas or glasses of wine began in her 20s. Now her limit is two glasses of wine five nights a week.

Many women find the program helps them to plan their drinking. They schedule their no-alcohol days for dates with no social events, and have learned to delay their first drink until dinner, rather than start drinking when they arrive home or cook dinner.

"The program also helped me work out why I drank. It was a habit that crept up over the years. I think life gets complicated - you have kids, you have problems, and I was opting out a bit," says 50-year-old Terri,* a receptionist, who has reduced her drinking by half.

"My desire to be clearheaded is now stronger than my desire to drink," she says. "I'm glad someone has realised that somewhere between people who have no problems with alcohol and those who are alcoholic there are people like me.

"Like those at the addiction research centre program, the women who make up 50 per cent of clients at the Herbert Street Clinic controlled drinking program at Royal North Shore Hospital tend to be in their 40s and 50s. Yet if more women in their 20s reduced their drinking, they might avoid the kind of incident that typically brings this age group to the clinic, says senior psychologist Georgina Spilsbury, co-ordinator of the program.

"When younger women decide they want help to drink less, it's usually because alcohol has put them in a risky situation and they've had a fright - either it's an unplanned sexual experience, or their drinking has led to taking other drugs and they've had hallucinations or become paranoid," she says. "Or sometimes it's because of a drink-driving charge or a relationship breakdown.

"It would be great if young women would come sooner and get control of their drinking. Part of the problem is that the message about standard drinks and low risk drinking hasn't sunk in."

** Names have been changed.*