

## Nine Simple and Effective Strategies for Mindful Drinking During Quarantine

by Patt Denning, coauthor of [\*Over the Influence, Second Edition\*](#)

Controlling your drinking during the coronavirus pandemic can be incredibly difficult. Group support meetings are cancelled, stress levels are sky-high, and people are struggling to process difficult emotions including trauma, grief, boredom, anger, and uncertainty. It's no wonder that experts have reported a sudden, dramatic rise in alcohol use.

If you are struggling with how much you are drinking right now, you are not alone. And "just say no," doesn't work for everyone. Here are nine simple and effective strategies to help you become more mindful about your drinking during these challenging times.

**1. RESIST NEW "HAPPY HOUR" HABITS.** Lots of people are video conferencing with friends and families and the online happy hour has really taken off! But this isn't the time to start new drinking habits if you didn't do this before. Maybe you went to happy hour on Fridays after work, but now you're getting requests for several times a week. Remember that you don't have to drink alcohol during all those video happy hours. You can hold a glass of anything and join in the conversation.

**2. NOTICE THE TIME.** Now that we're working bizarre schedules, it's easy to not even notice what time it is when the urge to drink hits, or a request to have a drink with someone comes into your inbox. Think about your habits prior to this shelter-in-place. If you were pretty much satisfied with your drinking pattern then, now isn't the time to start day drinking.

**3. MAKE SOME RULES.** Our regular structures have taken a hit with this virus shutdown. We join zoom meetings in our pajamas, or from our front porch. Who knows what time it is? Decide how much, how often, and *with whom* you want to drink. Make some rules about it. Not before 5:30. Not more than 3 times a week. Not with people you never used to drink with before. Even if you don't always follow your rules, you'll have a benchmark to assess how you're doing and what you might want to change.

**4. BEWARE THE HOME DELIVERY BOXES.** Really? You need to buy 3 bottles just in case? Or you really need a case just because? Having a lot of booze around makes it hard to notice how much you're drinking and contributes to over doing it.

**5. LEARN TO "SURF THE URGE."** When you first feel the wish to drink, check the time and write it down if you can. Then just stand still. Don't do anything. Or if it's easier, move around, adjust the window shades, get a drink of water. Distract yourself for a while. The impulse will go away. As soon as you notice that you forgot about drinking, check the time. Was it 1 minute or 10? This is your time frame for controlling yourself. You can say to yourself, "If I can wait 10 minutes, this urge to use will go away." If the urge comes back, do it again. You're trying to teach yourself, "This urge will go away whether or not I drink!"

**6. FILL YOUR SCHEDULE WITH ACTIVITIES THAT ARE INCOMPATIBLE WITH DRINKING.** Many people find strenuous exercise, like running, a great way to release built up tension. You could also go for a long walk or bike ride. Don't underestimate the power of breathing fresh air! But if exercise isn't your thing, get creative. Sit in the car and sing at the top of your lungs; take a long, hot shower; or sign up for a class online (Skillshare is a great option).

**7 MAKE SELF-MONITORING A HABIT.** You can do this by simply writing down each drink, what time it was, and how much you consumed; or use an app like DrinkControl. The point is not to be self-critical, but simply to be self-aware. It's important to know what your usual pattern is if you want to be able to change it.

#### **8. REMEMBER THE CORE VALUES OF HARM REDUCTION:**

**Understanding.** Understand your choices and the things you have done in your life so far. Knowing *why* you drink is essential to figuring out what to do about it.

**Acceptance.** Accept yourself and your choices and receive acceptance from others. Appreciate that you are doing your best right now, and look for the strengths, the humor, and the cleverness in your efforts.

**Compassion.** Guilt is paralyzing, and you must forgive yourself and have self-compassion in order to move forward on your journey to balance and moderation.

**Kindness.** Be kind to yourself and surround yourself (virtually!) with people who are kind to you.

**Connection.** Attachment—to a frosty IPA or a glass of white wine—can be replaced by, or exist alongside, connection to other people.

**Freedom to choose.** Always remember that you have autonomy—the right and the opportunity to have a hand in the direction of your life.

#### **9. PRACTICE MINDFULNESS WITH THE SOBER BREATHING SPACE\*:**

Stop or slow down right where you are and bring awareness to this moment.

Observe what is happening in this moment, in your body, your emotions, and your thoughts.

Breathe and notice the sensations of the in-breath and the out-breath.

Expand awareness to the reactions in your body to the situation you are in.

Respond mindfully and choose a course of action. Do not judge your choice.

**Patt Denning, PhD**, is Director of Clinical Services and Training at the Center for Harm Reduction Therapy (CHRT) in San Francisco, which she founded with Jeannie Little in 2000. CHRT provides a full range of harm reduction treatment services and trains hundreds of professionals each year. Widely recognized as an expert on drug treatment and dual diagnosis, Dr. Denning is one of the principal developers of harm reduction psychotherapy. With Jeannie Little, she is coauthor of [\*Over the Influence, Second Edition\*](#) (for the general public), and [\*Practicing Harm Reduction Psychotherapy, Second Edition\*](#) (for mental health professionals). <http://www.harmreductiontherapy.org/>

\* Adapted from [\*Controlling Your Drinking, Second Edition\*](#) by William R. Miller and Ricardo F. Muñoz