

women *who choose* not to **DRINK**

PEER PRESSURE DOESN'T EVER GO AWAY. THREE WOMEN TELL US WHY THEY CHOSE TO SAY 'NO'.

Callie Widd (45) Brand strategist

I gave up drinking alcohol on my 45th birthday. It seemed a very natural thing to do and wasn't difficult at all, but then I have never been a huge drinker. Sure, I have had major parties and, on the odd occasion, got drunk, but it's never been a vital part of my daily life.

I gave up mainly because I'm an older mother (I gave birth at 39), and I want to be physically fit and mentally able well into my daughter Sienna's life. I am convinced that in the years to come we will see alcohol as a drug and view it as highly addictive. Our kids will probably not believe how accessible alcohol was to us: just look at how our perceptions on smoking changed!

There is massive social pressure to drink.

I have been in the advertising and strategic planning business for the past 20 years and I think the pressure to drink (and abuse) alcohol is out of control. I still don't know how to handle people who want me to drink and party with them. I don't want to appear holier than thou; it's just a personal decision I have taken. The automatic assumption when people discover I don't drink is that I had a drinking problem – which I never did.

I have spent a large part of my life in the extreme zone, and while it has been exhilarating it comes at a price – usually mental and physical.

I want to be a compass for Sienna. And how can I do that if I am not living a good example?





Lee Snelgar, (23) Photographer

I am not interested in drinking alcohol. I have other things to do and think about. I don't judge people who drink, and I certainly don't think that I am better than them. This is about me, about me wanting to be present for both the good and the bad that happens to me in my life.

I can feel the effects of one drink immediately, and I don't like it. I never have. I don't like the altered state of mind that alcohol brings about. And I don't need it to have a good time.

When I go out with friends, some try to make me want to drink, but mostly it's okay. I find that those who push it on me seem to be more worried about being in the company of a non-drinker than about my decision not to drink. Maybe it's because they feel I won't be in the same headspace... I don't know.

People always want to know why I don't drink. I find that amazing; why aren't we asking why we do drink? Today it seems very normal to go out and have a few drinks, especially in

South Africa, where strength and manhood are often equated with drinking.

Humans have always courted excess and there seems to be such comfort in addictions. Perhaps it has something to do with all the uncertainty around, especially today. I look around me and see so much addiction – to cigarettes, to alcohol, to religion, to eating... but I am accepting of how others want to live their lives. It's really only my experience that I worry about. I only have one life and I want to live it 100% in the present.



Penny Theys (37) Fitness manager at Virgin Active

I come from a background of family addiction. My mother was addicted to prescription drugs brought on through living with my alcoholic father. I was introduced to the world of alcohol-induced behaviour as a child. My father used to encourage us to sip beer and wine – I must have been about 9 or 10 and I remember hating that. And then I remember him physically abusing my mother and then us children. My father was on and off the wagon for most of his adult life. We all belonged to Al Anon and he, AA, but our home was not the safe haven it should have been.

When I went to university, I drank – sometimes a lot. I was a party gal, but I knew that I could either change the family pattern, or sink into it. I chose the former.

Giving up alcohol wasn't a huge moment. The decision came gradually and I remember saying to myself that I would have a drink if I really, really wanted

one. And I haven't really, really wanted one since then. The last drink I had was about 10 years ago.

My parents both died relatively young from addiction-related diseases, and I am the guardian of my 18-year-old brother. He seems to have a handle on it all and he knows the dangers of excess, so I am not too hard on him. I just watch him carefully – but I am becoming less concerned as he gets older.

Is there pressure to drink alcohol? Yes, but then I just tell people I'm driving. It's easier than going through all the whys and why nots, which are quite personal. Most of my friends do drink, but it's the driving under the influence that bothers me more than their behaviour. I tend to drive others home a lot! None of my siblings seem to display the addictive behaviour that my parents did. Maybe the gene died out in our generation. Who knows? But I don't want to find out.

THE EXPERT SAYS

Dr Gillian Smale, a clinical psychologist, talks about why South African women drink: 'Alcohol consumption usually begins in a social setting... We begin using it because we find it gives us social confidence. Particularly in SA, there seems to be a high value placed on young people being gregarious and fun. And since few young people are naturally like this, they use alcohol to loosen their inhibitions.'

She says there is an assumption, rooted early in our lives, that a social event is not complete without alcohol. 'It's at this age that most of our drinking habits, or certainly our drinking attitudes, are laid down.'

'We've already learnt that drinking promotes relaxation, so the next step, once we begin climbing the stressful corporate ladder, is to have a daily sundowner – to relax. Women tend to experience more role overload with the responsibilities of home, mothering and career, and so are more prone to use alcohol as self-medication.'

Though she has no stats, Dr Smale believes more South Africans are drinking than ever before 'as a way to numb political uncertainty, financial insecurity and fears for personal safety... If it feels unsafe to go out at night, you rather stay home and place yourself in a cozy little alcoholic haze,' she says. ♣