

**FOR THOSE STRUGGLING TO STAY SOBER, CORONAVIRUS  
SHUTDOWNS OFFER HOPE AS WELL AS TEMPTATION**  
**by Sarah Hepola, for CNN (March 25, 2020)**

There's no easy time to get sober, but a global pandemic is tougher than most.

Back when I was trying and failing to quit, I'd reach for any excuse to bail on my better self. A bad day. A text from my ex, or no text.

One day, a snowstorm walloped the city, shuttering my office, and I pulled on my rubber boots with a sigh as if to say, "I guess I'm drinking now."

I didn't want to be this person, passing out on the futon with the television flickering on her face, waking up to green empties mashed with cigarette butts, but I didn't know another way.

"Who cares?" I thought, as I trudged to the liquor store on sidewalks shoveled by strangers. "Why bother trying to change?" It felt that day, like many days, that the universe was conspiring to keep me good and drunk. I can't even imagine what I'd make of a shelter-in-place edict and booze on delivery.

"Who cares? Why bother?" is not just a drunk's dilemma, of course. As the planet throbs with uncertainty, as we disappear behind deadbolts with our curtains pulled shut, many of us will be called by the voice of romantic doom. Why bother getting out of bed? Who cares if I eat all the cupcakes? Why not watch Netflix all day?

Some of this is human and necessary, but too much is unhealthy and numbing -- and how we find that balance will be one of the many challenges of this moment.

We live in a culture that gives us so few tools to find peace in our minds and so many ways to escape it. Beer, wine, vodka – it was the most reliable comfort I knew for a long time. But the more I reached for that fix, the more of a mess I became.

If you are trying and failing to quit drinking, I actually think this might be the perfect moment to get sober. The circumstances that force us to stare down our worst habits could also be the excuse we need to change.

I quit drinking nearly ten years ago, and the first months that followed were a bit like a self-quarantine. I bailed on social engagements and rarely went to bars or restaurants, where the free-flowing wine made my mouth water. I holed up inside my apartment

listening to podcasts and reading books and occupying my hands with dorky crafting projects like latch-hooking a picture of a tabby. It's a bit eerie how much a society in lockdown resembles people in early sobriety -- without the devastating global consequences, of course.

I don't mean to make light of our dire moment; I only mean to point out these are the impossible circumstances under which I once wished I could give up booze. I wanted the rest of the world to disappear, to stop shoving easy happiness in my face. I could find temptation in any billboard or passing stranger. I got such a heart sink seeing a smiling couple sipping Chardonnay on the patio, or a glamorous friend hoisting her martini glass on Instagram.

For months, I felt like a woman living on the loneliest island.

## **THE AA LIFELINE MOVES ONLINE**

Recovery meetings can be a bridge back to human connection, but I struggled there too. I was allergic to Alcoholics Anonymous at first, with its corny slogans and awkward human blinking, and I used to fantasize that 12-step meetings would get canceled so I could stop feeling guilty for skipping them.

In time I came to see that a 12-step program gave me what I badly needed – not only community and accountability but a way to address the problems underneath my chronic drinking. AA doesn't work for everyone, but it worked for me, and over the years I've been grateful for wisdom I never saw out there in the endless scroll of quick fixes and entertainment on demand. "One day at a time" is a corny slogan, it's true. It will also save you a world of pain.

I didn't understand when I first quit how few coping strategies I had, how much I had outsourced to the stress management system of "one more round." I had an overthinker's disdain for prayer and meditation and exercise, until I started seeing how useful they could be for lowering stress and anxiety, focusing the mind, finding calm in my own body -- so many of the things I was drinking for in the first place.

AA taught me that status, riches, intelligence and beauty are not barriers against the random lashes of fate. Alcoholism, like a virus, can strike anyone at any level of society. I consider it one of the profound gifts of my life that I've been able to sit in those hard metal chairs and discover how much of my heart might be shared with a total stranger.

I'm sad to think of those rooms going dark right now, and how many people looking for help might find a locked door. I also know that drunks find each other. We have been reaching across the darkness for a long time, and I'm glad to see [recovery groups move online](#).

Honestly, this is how I would have preferred my meetings in the beginning. I wanted to participate, but I wanted to stay safe in my home at the same time. And for better or worse, technology lets us do that.

I haven't been surprised to find other kinds of support groups popping up online, too. Happy hours, of course, but also meditation groups, parenting groups, single-person groups, writing groups and reading groups -- people linked by common interests and seeking new ways to connect. One aspect of AA meetings I've always appreciated is that you have to stay quiet when someone else is sharing, no matter how much you disagree or want to interrupt. You'd be amazed what you can learn when you're forced to listen to another human. So much better than the "everyone yell at once" rules of engagement on social media.

Each day at 5 p.m., I log on to Zoom to find 20 faces staring back at me. I'm becoming familiar with the rattle of their ceiling fans, the buttons of the couch where they sit, the titles on their bookshelves. It's a new way to have recovery meetings, but it's not that different. People talk about the pain of having a family but also having no family. They talk about the stress of their job but also having no job. The world is in crisis and the same as it ever was. People are struggling. We need each other.

## **COMBATING LONELINESS, TOGETHER**

Alcoholism is an affliction of loneliness. Whatever else chronic drinking might be – a disease, a rut, a genetic inheritance, a behavioral disorder, a deficiency of dopamine or some neurotransmitter (and we can argue about this over Zoom some other time) – it feeds on solitude and despair, and we have plenty on tap these days.

But as many have pointed out, this could also be a moment when we return to humble pleasures and simpler connections. I love hearing the stories of families playing board games, of old-fashioned telephone conversations, of neighbors greeting each other from 6 feet away, sometimes for the first time.

And in the end, that's the answer to the questions, "Who cares? Why bother?" Because we need each other in this battle. Nobody could blame a person for

cratering to self-pity and fear, but others might be inspired by your example if you rose up instead.

In those long and agonized months when I was trying and failing to quit drinking, I was haunted by a sense that I was not who I wanted to be. I wasn't really thinking about anyone else, and I wouldn't for a while. I could rationalize continuing to drink. I could keep making excuses. But in the deepest part of me I knew it was time, and that was a feeling I never could outrun.

Yes, a global catastrophe is the perfect excuse to stay good and drunk. It is also the perfect chance to finally become the person you want to be.

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