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November 2020

Well, we made it. As I write this, Thanksgiving leftovers are depleted, the tree is up and decorated the Holiday Season has officially arrived. One thing we can always count on this time of the year is that the festivity dial gets cranked up over the next few weeks as we celebrate with friends and family, and for a high percentage of people in the US that festivity will involve drinking.

With that, I thought it would be timely to talk a little bit about drinking. BAR40 has always had a '52-week Sober Challenge' aspect to it so the topic is familiar territory, but the recent increased interest shown by people in taking a break from the over-indulgence in the booze the past months have brought is a sign of the times we live in...and related Covid-drinking fatigue. I realize of course that not everyone drinks but even if this topic isn't directly applicable to you, perhaps it's subject matter you will find useful as it relates to someone in your life.

Covid-19 has been life-changing for all of us in every way imaginable (and some unimaginable), and one of the unfortunate trend developments has been the significant uptick in alcohol consumption. For some people, that means the drinking habit they had going into Covid has swelled into a full-grown problem now they do not have the guardrails and structure that their normal 8-5 office routine provided. For other people, it may mean that their once a month glass of wine at dinner has turned into Zoom happy hours 3 times a week and they've found that when the Zoom call is over at 6 pm they tend to keep drinking the rest of the night. For others, the change in schedule and not going into their office has meant that instead of having their first drink of the day at 6 pm it has crept up into the afternoon, and now 8 months into this new world order, their drinking is tracking towards the "its noon somewhere" philosophy. Alcohol is an addictive substance, and like any other addictive substance...the more we do it, the more we tend to overdo it.

In a lot of ways, this year has proved to be the perfect cocktail recipe (as it were) for a drinking problem to develop. Ingredient #1 is social isolation, stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental ailments that have been worsened by the 24/7 onslaught of Covid news and worry. Ingredient #2 is a general normalizing of excess drinking and afternoon Quarantini parties rationalized with the reasoning that "hey, it's the end of the world...bottoms up!". Finally, add in the fact that many

people are now working from home and are operating in an environment without direct interaction with co-workers and managers and have newfound freedom to drink freely without any concerns of 'getting caught'. "Can't smell the booze on Zoom, right!?" (That is a direct quote I've heard on more than one call).

If you find yourself somewhere along the concern spectrum regarding your drinking, then this is the perfect time of year to pause for some honest introspection and corrective action if needed. If you do decide that you want to cut back, take a break, or stop drinking altogether and need some help sticking to your guns then looking at the concept of cravings is an ideal place to start. Oftentimes shining a light on the process of what's happening in our brain, both consciously and subconsciously, can be a huge help in better understanding our triggers and habits and dealing with the situation.

William Porter, author of Alcohol Explained is a subject matter expert who has expertise in helping people stop drinking by eliminating their desire and has written extensively on the area. For the sake of keeping this brief, I'll summarize with his concept of the 4-stage lifecycle of cravings and how they factor in as the main culprit when we find ourselves reverting to behaviors we want to change.

1. Fantasizing- In our heads, we are thinking how great it would be to have a drink (or 3). This is made out to be a much more fulfilling event in our heads than it actually is of course...that's our brain playing a drinking highlight reel that the liquor industry can only hope to someday replicate in its effectiveness at convincing you to drink! This fantasizing is a form of slow torture in that we keep thinking about the object of our desire (this can just as easily be food or anything we are trying to gain some better control over but for this example let's just stick to alcohol). The fantasizing is certainly distracting but not a huge problem in itself. We fantasize all the time about winning the \$300 million PowerBall but don't take it to the next level by quitting our jobs and draining our savings accounts in order to load up on tickets!

2. Consideration- This is the 'slippery slope' stage where you start to entertain the idea that maybe just one drink wouldn't be a big deal. If you were to freeze the scene in the movie at this moment...this is where the trouble begins and you shout at the screen, "turn around, don't go in there!". While we are escalating our fantasy to the realm of 'maybe...just maybe' status we are now proceeding into the high-risk area for phase #3.

3. Subconscious handover: One of the amazing superpowers this brain of ours has is the ability to function very efficiently at task management and decision making. While most of the time that can work in our favor at executing tasks without much thought, it can also work against us...like in this scenario. The subconscious recognizes that in our conscious brain we are wasting a lot of brainpower with the line of thinking that may include: "just one, I'll quit tomorrow, it's been a tough week, I deserve to relax, it would be great to try this new wine", etc. The subconscious

identifies that it needs to step in to put this nonsense to rest and makes the decision for you that you will, in fact, have a drink. “Problem solved,” says the ruthlessly efficient subconscious... decision made and onto the next thing on the list.

4. Rationalization- Now back to our conscious brain for the final stage of craving (at which point your resolve to not drink is solidly in ‘red alert’ status) which is basically when we are mentally scrolling through our standard go-to excuses and rationalization playbook looking for one to latch on to that will allow you come to some form of peace with the idea that you are in fact about to do what you earlier in the day were committed not to do.

The main takeaway from Porter’s analysis is that we are not powerless over cravings and that having awareness of how the stages will progress gives us the chance to stop the cycle from reaching the point of engaging in behavior we want to avoid.

Action steps:

It all starts with our mindset. With drinking, it’s a simple (but not always as easy) mental step where we fully commit to the idea that we are without question, unequivocally, may lightning strike us dead, not drinking. There is simply no other alternative. This small but mighty step ensures that like the lottery example, there is not going to be any fantasy to action conversion. This ‘burn the boats’ mentality that alcohol will not be had is an airtight capsule that will not allow Stages 2,3, and 4 to enter into the equation. The subconscious will never factor in because there is no indecisiveness it needs to put to rest. Only we can do this for ourselves though and it takes genuine authenticity to self. Not the 50/50 version you may give to someone else in your life where you make half-hearted pledges to make some improvements but deep down, you're not truly that interested in changing...more likely you may be more interested in just changing the subject!

An example of the full stop mindset can easily be found with expecting mothers. There are always exceptions of course but statistically speaking women who are pregnant are locked and loaded with the mindset that drinking is off the table for the next nine months or so. In a lot of cases, the mom-to-be is very vocal in expressing her impatience to “get this margarita party started as soon as this baby is born” but this is just harmless fantasizing as they know deep down that they will not be having that margarita party while they’re expecting.

If developing that ironclad mindset is action #1 to stop the destructive cravings from progressing, then the 2nd step in your personal accountability goal to change your drinking is to have a plan in place to distract yourself from the initial cravings when they pop up. If you know that around 5 pm it’s normally Miller time, around that time you will likely start thinking about drinking. Plan on going for a walk or run or any other activity that will disrupt the normal routine that involves drinking. Essentially you will be reprogramming the code that your internal operating

system is running and the new habits you add to your life will replace the old habits, causing the cravings to subside.

I'll wrap up this column by simply saying that if you feel like your drinking is starting to get a little bit out of hand then it almost certainly is. If you find yourself in the category of 'growing concerned' (or the people around, you are pointing out your drinking is concerning to them) then I emphatically suggest you give yourself a break from the booze for a month or so. Whether you choose to try this mindset change method or one of the more conventional programs like AA, the best method is the one that works for you. Aside from the fantastic feeling that comes from achieving the goal of becoming the version of yourself that you aspire to as a bonus, you'll sleep, look, and feel 100% better while boosting your immunity levels at the same time. In this Covid-19 world, all those life improvements are worthwhile pursuits!