

TO YOUR



*Why going dry,
even temporarily, may
enhance your
efforts to live more
mindfully.*

by Irina Gonzalez

Before I quit drinking, I had trouble sustaining any kind of mindfulness practice. Focusing on my body and the present moment was almost impossible after my regular happy hour cocktail or post-dinner nightcap. But even if you've never been a heavy drinker, you may have noticed how alcohol—yes, even a single glass of rosé—dulls your senses. That's fine if you drink in moderation and enjoy an occasional mental “time-out,” but it might also clash with your desire to live more mindfully. After all, it's pretty hard to tune into your senses and live in the moment if you're seeking out that pleasant dulling effect too often.

By now, you've probably heard of the “sober curious” movement. The term, which was coined by author Ruby Warrington in her book *Sober Curious*, has recently taken off thanks to the growing popularity

of “Dry January” and “Sober September.” Those who are sober curious are not typically people who require treatment for alcohol use disorder but rather individuals who are questioning their current habits and wondering how alcohol has been impacting their physical and/or mental health. They may choose to stop drinking—or “go dry”—for a brief period of time to determine whether they still have a healthy relationship with alcohol and how to improve it if they later decide to go back to drinking.

In short, those who are sober curious and experiment with a dry patch often become mindful drinkers (or make a conscious choice to become non-drinkers), fully aware of how their bodies and minds react to alcohol.

MINDFUL VS. MINDLESS DRINKING

Maybe you don't drink enough for your mental faculties to be noticeably compromised, but are you drinking mindfully? Some alcohol enthusiasts do: Picture someone selecting a bottle from a specific vintage, pouring it into a

Stop “drinking without thinking.”

beautiful glass, and relaxing in a comfortable chair while they swirl the liquid, sniff it, and then sip it slowly while savoring the nuanced flavors. Most people, however, don't devote this kind of attention to beer, wine or spirits, says neuroscientist Sunjeev Kamboj, PhD, a professor of Translational Clinical Psychology at University College London who has studied mindfulness and alcohol intake.

“For many drinkers, alcohol consumption happens on autopilot—for example, they get home from work, open a bottle of wine and drink half of it or more. At no stage was a deliberate decision like ‘Now I'm going to pour myself a drink’ made,” says Kamboj. “Some people call this ‘drinking without thinking.’”

The upshot is that learning mindfulness can help those who currently drink too much tune in and stop over-indulging. Kamboj led a study in which a group of heavy drinkers attended a single session of mindfulness training, then were sent home with instructions to practice for 15 minutes a day for seven days. Participants were also given a card reminding them to turn to this mindfulness technique when they were craving a drink... and it worked. The study, which was published in the *International Journal of Neuropsychopharmacology*, found that participants significantly cut back on their consumption.

Even if you're not someone who has too many beers at the end of a long day, drinking in a more mindful manner can be beneficial. (See “Mindful Drinking,” page 85.) But so can taking a complete break from alcohol, even if it's only for a short while.

HOW TO BREAK UP WITH ALCOHOL

Jolene Park, a functional nutritionist, health coach, TEDx speaker and expert on gray area drinking (which usually refers to the blurry zone between “Do I have a problem?” and hitting rock bottom), believes almost everyone interested in mindfulness can benefit from taking a break from booze. “In order to be present and grounded, we need to not be chemically altered,”



MINDFUL DRINKING

How to be more present when you choose to imbibe.

TO TOAST OR NOT TO TOAST?

1 Consider the Why
Before going out for your usual after-work cocktail or opening that bottle of wine with dinner, sit with your body and determine why you are imbibing tonight. Is it to celebrate? To de-stress? To avoid a difficult feeling? Sort it out, then decide whether it's a good enough reason to reach for that drink.

2 Appreciate Every Sip
If you're going to drink, fully appreciate the experience. Don't rush it; just sip and sit with your senses. Do you see the light shining through your glass? Can you hear the ice cubes clink against the side? Do you taste the subtle sweetness of that grapefruit mixer? Do you smell the aroma of that garnish? Is the copper mug cool to the touch?

3 Set Your Own Rules
You don't have to drink wine at dinner just because everyone else in your group is. You don't have to have a third cocktail before going dancing. And you certainly don't have to drink on a Tuesday if you decided that you're reserving alcohol for the weekends. Continue to make your own mindful decisions about when and why you're drinking (or not drinking).

she says. “[Whichever] label you identify with regarding alcohol use—normal drinker, gray area drinker, alcoholic,” Park continues, “removing alcohol from the body and brain for any period of time is always a positive thing.”

Kamboj agrees that stepping away from drinking can be a useful exercise. “Alcohol interferes with the ability to pay attention on a single thing for a sustained period,” which is a basic component of mindfulness.

If you’re not sure where to start on your mindfulness-without-alcohol journey, try designating certain days of the week as alcohol-free and see how the shift impacts your practice. You might decide to abstain during

distressing, seek help from a mental health professional or call 800-662-HELP.)

While any mindfulness strategy that appeals to you is likely to be helpful, Kamboj recommends the “open monitoring” and the “focused attention” techniques: In the former, you simply witness everything that is happening to you (thoughts, feelings, memories, body sensations). Some sensations might be uncomfortable, but that’s OK; powering through can help you learn to better tolerate such distress. With focused attention, you focus on your breath or on an external object like a lit candle; this approach can be especially helpful if you’re having trouble quieting your “monkey mind,” he adds.

Take a booze break and see how you feel.

the workweek yet still have a few drinks on the weekend. At the same time, try a mindfulness technique every day and make note of how you feel while practicing with and without alcohol.

Alternatively, you can try going dry for a longer period of time—say, 30 days—and see what happens. This may be the best way to truly see how alcohol is impacting your mindfulness practice as well as your overall physical and mental health.

If pouring a drink has been your go-to move whenever stress strikes, try turning to a calming meditation practice at that very moment, suggests Park. (If the idea of avoiding alcohol for even a short period of time is extremely

After your sober experiment ends, what happens next is up to you. You might decide you feel better without alcohol and opt to continue abstaining, or you might resume imbibing but in a more purposeful fashion. When in doubt about whether to opt for alcohol in a given moment, it never hurts to try a mindfulness exercise first to try to get some clarity. Says Park, “When we’re calmer, the brain can slow down and be more mindful, which is often what we’re seeking when we reach for a drink.”

Irina Gonzalez is a Florida-based freelance writer and editor who covers parenting, recovery and Latinx culture.

A MINDFUL APPROACH TO WEED

DOES CANNABIS ENHANCE MINDFULNESS OR DETRACT FROM IT?

Why ganja meditation might be more than an excuse to get high.
by Jessie Gill, RN, cannabis nurse

Alcohol and cannabis (aka marijuana) are both mind-altering substances, but there’s an important distinction. Alcohol is a depressant, so it dulls the senses; cannabis can have sedative, stimulating and/or psychoactive properties. While the proportion can vary substantially depending on the strain, there’s reason to believe that cannabis might lend itself to boosting mindfulness.

An Ancient Tradition
Cannabis has been connected to meditative practices for centuries. Bhang, a traditional drink of cannabis and spices, is listed in the Hindu sacred texts (the Vedas) as one of the “five sacred plants.”

With cannabis now being legalized for medical and/or recreational use in many areas of the U.S., there’s been an explosive level of interest in combining it with wellness practices including

mindfulness. While “CBD yoga” and “ganja meditation” might seem gimmicky, there is some science to suggest that they might make sense.

Due to state and federal regulations, research on cannabis is still in its infancy. But preliminary studies have found that the drug causes brain changes that mimic those that occur when someone engages in meditation sans drugs.

What the Science Says
Humans have cannabinoid receptors throughout our bodies; ingesting cannabis stimulates these receptors. According to animal research conducted at Vanderbilt University, the endocannabinoid system plays a significant role in mediating activity in the amygdala, which is the brain’s fight-or-flight center. Other research, published in 2018, looked at a small group of patients

with schizophrenia and found that those who used cannabis had decreased activity in the default-mode network (DMN) of the brain. A similar calming of activity in the DMN occurs during meditation.

Experimenting Wisely

No one is suggesting that anyone should vape cannabis or eat a pot brownie in lieu of engaging in other mindfulness techniques, but it’s possible that working cannabis into your current practice could enhance it. If cannabis is legal in your area and you decide to give it a try, start by seeking out guidance from a reputable dispensary about which strains are best for meditation.

Getting the dose right is also important; there’s nothing mindful about getting so high that you end up too sedated (couch lock) or having a panic attack. Start with a low dose and increase it slowly until you find your sweet spot.