

THE STOP BINGE EATING PODCAST

with Kirstin Sarfde

Ep #234: A Year Without Drinking Alcohol

Hello! Today's episode is going to be a little different than usual because as you can see by the title, I'll be talking about drinking alcohol but don't worry, I'll be talking about eating and bingeing too because this *is* a binge eating podcast.

So, in a previous episode, I had mentioned that in 2021 I did a year without drinking alcohol and I said that if anyone is interested in hearing about it, I'd do a whole episode on it and because I did get requests for it, here it is!

It was an interesting experience for me, and because I am a binge eating coach, I noticed there were some similarities between drinking alcohol and eating food and I want to share with you what I learned and along the way, and I hope you learn a little something about yourself too whether it be why you have a hard time stopping binge eating, a new compelling reason for you to commit to doing the work to stop binge eating, and maybe if your drinking is something you're interested in changing because it affects your eating or for any reason really, you might learn a little something about your own drinking.

And let me be clear here that I'm not trying to convince you to change anything about your drinking, or your eating for that matter, I'm just sharing my experience and what I noticed for myself and with other people. So as always, take what you want, leave what you don't, and make decisions for yourself because they're what you truly want and you like your reasons for making those decisions.

So, let's start with the goal setting, why I did it, and what my parameters were.

Back in 2020, I was not sleeping well most of the time and it was really pissing me off. Like most people, I really dislike feeling tired during the day and most days, I was feeling too tired. I knew my

sleep was being interrupted more than it used to and it seemed I wasn't getting restful sleep even when I was seemingly sleeping for 8 hours.

So I started trying to problem solve and toward the end of 2020, I decided I was going to cut out two things to help me sleep better.

One was alcohol and the other was caffeine.

Now, caffeine wasn't a huge addiction of mine. I don't drink coffee, my preferred caffeine beverage is tea and I don't think I was drinking it every day at the time but, I usually would on the weekends and because it's a known sleep disruptor, I chose to just cut it out and only drink decaf.

And with alcohol, I wasn't a huge drinker at the time. I was more back in my 20s and early 30s like a lot of people are. I definitely drank to get drunk and I didn't have a problem with it. But at some point, I decided to start cutting back. I don't know why, but I do remember deciding I would give myself a 3 drink limit. I think I came up with that after realizing that most of the time, not much happened that was fun during the fourth drink.

I started seeing it as wasted time and money. Maybe it was because the circumstances I was in were different, it wasn't the same kinds of parties or gatherings or events as earlier in my life and as I would drink that 4th drink, the good times were dying down, people were leaving, and I was thinking I would have just been better off either leaving or just having a water until I wanted to leave, which probably wouldn't be too much later. Also, I've always been someone who is cognizant of my sleep and like I said, I started seeing it as time wasted because I would be better off going to bed instead of staying out for another hour or so having that 4th drink.

So I made my 3 drink maximum and I wasn't perfect with it, and I was okay with that. But having that limit helped me to stop and think about if that 4th drink would really be worth it or not.

And I think that's something that's helpful about having limits whether it be for drinks or for food. When you're not in the moment of enjoying yourself with the drinks or food, you've decided what you want your relationship with it to be like and although you may not choose to honor that limit 100% of the time, you might decide to have another drink, another cookie, another slice of pizza, having the limit gives you a point at which you can stop and think about what you want to do next instead of not having a certain time at which you want to stop and think.

I just see it as a tool that can help you stay aligned with your true wants and make decisions that are aligned with your personal goals.

So I had my 3 drink maximum for awhile and at some point, I lowered it to two, I think later in 2020.

So it wasn't like I went from drinking heavily to not drinking at all. It was a gradual decline in the amount I was drinking so I think that made it easier.

And this is something I recommend to people with joy foods too if they are someone who binge eats. If you want to cut back on how much joy food you're eating, don't make a big leap from a ton to none. Decrease slowly. It's so much easier to sustain the slow change than the big one.

So as 2021 was approaching, I decided to go down to none but, I gave myself permission to have sips of other people's drinks if I wanted to try something or enjoy a taste of something I know I like and throughout the year I think I had about 7 or so sips of alcohol.

And when I decided to make this a year long goal, I had some reservations. I don't even think I was confident I would do it, or that my reasons were compelling enough for a whole year but I thought it would be a fun challenge to do it for a whole year. I liked the idea of doing a whole year.

I've been known to do some year long challenges in the past. I did a year without soda, especially Diet Coke because I was drinking it pretty much daily, sometimes more than once, and I did a year without fast food, anywhere that had a drive thru.

So no caffeine and no alcohol was just my next year-long goal and I was a little nervous because even though I didn't think I had a problem with either, I definitely didn't consider myself to be an addict, I still knew that I relied on both.

I relied on the caffeine to wake me up so I could have fun on weekends, and sometimes so I could work better on weekdays. But didn't want to rely on it. I wanted to figure out why I was feeling tired to begin with and I believed that not drinking caffeine would help me to find the root cause so I could work on that.

And I relied on alcohol to have fun, to feel comfortable, to make me more social, and to have something to do.

Back a few years ago, going out for drinks was one of my main sources of fun and pleasure. My ex and I would go out for a drink or two after dinner or we'd go out for drinks during the day on the weekends. And I'd go out for drinks with friends. It was just an easy, go-to thing to do.

I also liked drinking because it would calm my social anxiety or take away awkwardness I was feeling. So if I was feeling some kind of discomfort hanging out with people, I could just have a drink to relax myself.

I also get more talkative when I drink so I thought I was more fun to be around if I drank. I liked having a kind of racing mind of thoughts with things to say and talk about when I was drinking.

So now that I wasn't going to be drinking, I didn't have that crutch like I'd had.

I was going to have to feel awkward, feel uncomfortable, feel anxious, feel bored, and I was going to have to be okay with the version of myself who isn't as talkative as when I'm buzzy, and I was going to have to find other things to do instead of going out for drinks, but with that last one, I actually did go out for drinks on a few occasions and just got a mock-tail or drank water.

And this is the same stuff that you have to be willing to do too if you're going to eat less food.

So many people's binges start innocently with a little eating here and a little there because they're feeling socially awkward or anxious, or they're bored and don't know what else to do, or they want to do something fun and don't know what else to do, or everyone else is eating and they don't want to feel awkward being the only one not eating.

They eat to avoid how they're feeling or to get pleasure and it snowballs into eating more and more and more.

And that wouldn't happen if we were just willing to feel how we're feeling without trying to numb it or cover it up.

Because I wasn't drinking, and I also wasn't going to use food as a cover-up either, I felt through the feelings I felt.

And in doing that, I got even better at feeling my feelings.

I was pretty good at it before, it's part of what helped with my eating issues, but by then taking away alcohol too, I had nothing else that I was interested in doing to handle my emotions except to feel them.

Practice made me even more proficient.

I know a lot of you aren't willing to feel your feelings because they're uncomfortable or because you fear they won't go away but when you do actually do it, and you practice doing it over and over, it becomes so much easier to deal with the discomfort, you get more comfortable with it, and you learn that it is in fact temporary.

Although we don't have to have evidence to believe something is true, it's easier to believe when you have evidence and after going through uncomfortable feelings time and time again, you create that evidence for yourself.

I noticed for me that so often I felt uncomfortable at the beginning of hanging out with people, like I didn't know where to start with conversation. Normally I'd grab a drink right away to make that go away but without a drink, I learned that it really was so temporary, we'd get into the swing of things pretty quickly, and the discomfort would be gone. But too often we don't give our feelings, and our urges as well, a chance to move through us. We just grab a drink or something to eat as soon as we feel it.

Same thing while in the middle of hanging out with people. If there was a lull in conversation, eating or drinking can be the awkwardness destroyer but, relaxing into the moment of awkwardness can also help the awkwardness.

What people tend to do, myself included, when social anxiety or awkward feelings come into play is to freak out about it.

I might start to think that we have nothing else to talk about, that I'm boring, that I'm not interesting, that I have nothing to say, or start pressuring myself to come up with something to say and guess what's going to happen when I do all that.

I start to feel even more uncomfortable and I say nothing because I'm so stuck in my head worrying about not talking.

But if I relax into it, and think it's fine, that's when my mind will open up to new ideas and thoughts.

Silent moments are going to happen, and how we feel during them will be determined by our thoughts and how we feel will determine what we say and do in those moments.

So without drinking and overeating in those situations, I got better at relaxing into discomfort.

Then, there's the fun and pleasure part of it.

That was a bit of a challenge for me at first.

Like I said before, something my ex and I would regularly do would be to go out for dinner and then either stay for a drink or two or go somewhere else for drinks. But because I wasn't drinking and he didn't want to drink alone, although he would with dinner, but not after if drinking was *the* thing we were doing, we had to find something else to do and the thing we did the most was play games at home and that was fun. We'd play Yahtzee, Skip-Bo, Uno, we had this super fun game called Boss Toss that's like a bean bag throwing game, stuff like that.

And if I'm being honest, I would say those games and hanging out at a bar drinking were probably equally as fun.

I was worried about not having as much fun if I wasn't drinking but fun was not taken away from me. I found other ways to get it.

And then once he and I broke up and I moved into a new apartment in one of the cutest little cities, not drinking actually made my experience of my new home better.

So, he and I did still hang out as friends for a couple months after we broke up and I remember one day we were out walking around the city and were just exploring around and I realized something. Had this been the year before, we probably would have walked for a bit and then gone to a bar for drinks because that's what we did so many times.

But that day, that wasn't an option in my mind and because it wasn't, it pushed me to think of other things to do, it motivated me to say hey, let's go walk across the bridge, let's stop here and look around, let's go over to this place I've never been before.

And that's one of the things I loved the most about not drinking. It gave me a reason to think of other things to do instead of just doing the default of going out for a drink.

It sparked creativity and exploration and curiosity and I loved it so much.

And with all of this, both the fun part and the emotions part, the byproduct that I love the most from all of it was greater self-confidence.

I feel more self-confident without alcohol. It feels good to not think I need it like I used to think I did. It feels good to handle my emotions without drinking to cover them up. It feels good to have fun without drinking.

It feels good to rely on me instead of relying on alcohol.

And now that I'm relying on me, I really do think my life is better than it was.

I'm doing more things that are fulfilling and that will create lasting memories that I don't think going out for drinks wouldn't have.

Not to say that I didn't have great times and don't have some great memories from drinking with friends, I do. But personally, I like what I do now so much more.

And I like not drinking. I actually feel kinda empowered when I don't. It goes back to the thought that I don't need it and that feels so cool to me.

And what's kinda weird to me is that now, I rarely desire it at all.

It's not even that I don't need it, I don't want it.

Rarely I will think about how nice drinking a glass of really good red wine would be or a delicious cocktail but most of the time, it's just not on my mind and not something I want.

And it's not giving it up for a year that did that, I want to be clear about that.

That's something people think they can do with alcohol and with certain foods. It's a common idea with sugar and flour especially.

If you just stop consuming it, you'll stop desiring it.

But that's not always the case.

Plenty of people, you may be one of them, have given up a food for an extended period of time, then either craved it hard because you hadn't had it in so long or once you did finally ate it, your desire skyrocketed and you binged on it.

Time is not what changes desire. Your thoughts change your desire.

My desire for alcohol changed not because I didn't drink it but because I changed how I thought about it.

Before, I saw it as a way to feel comfortable, as something fun to do, and a way to help me act how I want to act socially.

But now, those aren't the first thoughts that comes to my mind when I think about drinking.

I actually think, "It will make me tired and it will mess up my sleep."

Let's not forget the whole reason why I took a break from drinking in the first place, to help my sleep.

There were too many nights that I would wake up in the middle of the night, wide awake, and sometimes my heart would be racing. Sometimes I'd have insomnia in the middle of the night. Sometimes I'd wake up too early and not be able to go back to sleep. And because I'd often experience this after drinking, I wanted to cut out the drinking to see what happened.

And to give you an update, I still sometimes have middle of the night insomnia where I can't fall back asleep for an hour, maybe more on rare occasions, but it's not what it used to be and now most days, I feel well rested. So my sleep issues weren't entirely caused by alcohol, there are other factors that I'm still working on too but it's nice to not have alcohol be a sleep disruptor anymore in the way that I believe it was for me.

And it's not just me. Studies show that alcohol prevents you from getting restful sleep.

And when I say that "it will make me tired and it will mess up my sleep," I always look at it like this. If I drink earlier in the day or evening, I'll be like a zombie when I stop drinking. There were too many nights that I'd stop drinking at like 6pm or 7pm and the rest of my night until bedtime I wouldn't be able to enjoy myself because I'm all zoned out after the buzz wears off and I'm coming down. Kinda reminds me of how the rest of my day would be wasted after a binge when I'm all cloudy and brain fogged from eating all that food.

So, then a person might then tell me to just drink until I go to bed, I've had people suggest that, so I don't have that zombie time and if I did, that's when my sleep would be poor.

I don't want either of that. I want to enjoy my evenings before bed and I want to feel as rested as I can when I wake up in the morning.

And that's more important to me than getting an alcohol buzz.

Just like most of the time, feeling my best is more important than getting more pleasure from food. Again, most of the time of course. There are still occasions when I choose the food pleasure and I'm okay with that. It's okay to get that extra pleasure sometimes and experience the consequences if I'm choosing to do it and like my reasons for doing it.

When I look at my reasons to drink and my reasons not to, it's really no contest almost all of the time and that's why the desire is so low.

My brain so easily goes to, "If I drink I'll be tired," when I consider having a drink and I kinda love that it does. And it does because I trained it to go there.

It also goes there because there isn't any reliance on it anymore. My brain isn't grasping onto it as a solution for anything. I have better solutions now.

This is just like when people think eating a lot of food will be soothing, comforting, fun, something fun to do and they shift into thinking more about how awful they'll feel and how it will affect them.

This shift is possible, it happens for people all the time. They stop seeing eating a lot of food as a way to get what they want and get it in other ways, which might be going through the feeling they're feeling, doing thought work, or getting creative about what else they can do for fun. And they practice telling themselves what the consequences of eating all that food will be. And that's how your desire for eating so much food can decrease.

So now it's been over two years since I set that goal. In 2021, I had no full drinks, only like 7 sips.

In 2022, my first drink was on my birthday in January. I had a glass of wine at dinner and I did it because I thought that would be a good time to have my first drink in over a year. It was a good glass of wine, I enjoyed it, and that was it.

I didn't have my second drink until a couple months later when my friend wanted us to go to a brewery that we'd talked about previously, probably before 2021 actually. I decided to engage in the drinking with her, we were at a brewery after all, and I got a flight, which is like a beer sampler, that probably equalled to about 2 beers. And what I found to be kinda funny is that I drank them soooo slowly. I was afraid of getting drunk because I had no idea what might have happened to my tolerance. I just really don't like the feeling of being drunk anymore, which is funny to me because like I said, back in the day that was the goal a lot of the time, to get drunk, but now I don't like that feeling so I took my time.

And since then, I haven't had one full drink. I even went with a tour group to Ireland this year, one of the biggest drinking countries in the world, and I only had a few sips of Guinness when we went to the Guinness Storehouse, a few sips of Jameson when we went to the distillery, a sip of Bailey's that someone bought for me and don't worry, they knew I wasn't gonna drink it they were just including me, and a sip of another Irish beer at dinner one night. Even though alcohol was included with a few of the dinners we had, I didn't drink it. And just because I was in Ireland, I wasn't going to use that as an excuse to drink because I genuinely didn't want to.

I was already dealing with jet lag and we had so much packed into our schedule, I didn't want to make myself more tired by drinking and that's why I said no. Even if it was free, even if that's what my fellow travelers were doing, and even though our tour guide kept recommending bars and drinks to drink.

It being included isn't a good enough reason for me and I know a lot of people eat for that reason. They have a hard time saying no to food if it's included with something, like they're not getting their money's worth if they don't eat it. And you can think about it that way or, you can think about the money you spent going toward the experience you're having.

I didn't think about how I paid for those drinks when I signed up for the tour, I just thought about how my money went toward all the fun I was having.

So it's been almost a year since that flight of beer that I drank and I have no idea when I'll drink a full drink again. I actually was going to on New Year's Eve but I told myself I wouldn't drink until 10 or 10:30pm so I wouldn't get too tired before midnight and by the time that time came around, I didn't want it anymore. I had had two sips of someone else's drink earlier and that was it. I was good.

And now, I don't have any rules around it. If I want to drink, I will. If I don't want to, I won't. If I want a sip, I'll have one.

I listen to my true wants, what my inner voice is telling me that I want, and that's what I do.

It just so happens that most of the time, I just don't want it, just like most of the time, I don't want to eat too much food.

If I'm tired, I think it will make me more tired.

If I feel good, then I already feel good so what's the point? I don't need alcohol to feel good, especially knowing that that bump in good feelings will crash into low, tired feelings afterward. I'd rather just ride the good feelings I naturally feel now.

And I want to sleep well so I can feel my best the next day.

So I went from heavy drinking, which I think was like a normal twenty-something, and early thirty-something, at least it was with the people I hung out with, to 3 drinks max, to 2 drinks, to none, to rarely.

And I love it.

And thankfully, my family has gotten used to it so they don't bother me about it anymore, so that's nice and the people I spend the most time with aren't big drinkers either and that's nice too.

No one seems bothered by my lack of drinking, even my friend who loves drinking, she has no problem having a drink or two if I'm not and I love that for her. You do you girl and I'll do me and we'll have a great time.

But if you have people who are not supportive of your decision to eat less, to not eat at certain times, or to change your drinking habits, check out the episode where I first mentioned my drinking break, #198 titled, "Feeling Pressured to Eat or Not Eat."

What you choose to eat and drink will affect *you* the most so make decisions that you want to make and decisions you're happy with, decisions that you like.

If you do choose to take a break from something, remember that time does not change how you feel. Your thoughts do.

So if you spend that time thinking about how much you miss it, how crappy your life is without it, how it's not fair, that you can't have it, or you shouldn't have it, not only will your desire not change but, it's going to be very challenging to stick with it.

I stuck with it because my reasons to do it were compelling, I loved them, and I believed I would become a better version of myself through the process.

And I truly believe I did.

Alright, so that's my story, I think I covered it all. If there's anything I missed that you want to know about, feel free to email info@coachkir.com and ask.

Okay, I'll talk to you next week, bye bye!