

Transcript:

Alcohol is STILL a Drug: An Exploratory Webinar Series – October 2021

Presenter: Ruby Warrington
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ANN SCHENSKY: Good morning, everyone and welcome we'll get started in just about a minute and give everyone a chance to get into the room.

All right. I think we will get started. Again, welcome, everyone, to the second in our series, Alcohol is Still a Drug: An Exploratory Series.

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We just have a couple of housekeeping details for you today. This presentation is recorded, so we will not have a live speaker today. But please put any questions for the speaker in the Q&A pod at the bottom of your screen. And we will ask the presenter to answer them in writing, and they will be posted on our website along with the recording.

And certificates of attendance will be sent to all who attend the session. And they take about two weeks, and we send them to you via email.

The presenter today is Ruby Warrington. Ruby is the creator of Sober Curious. Author of the 2018 book of the same title, her work has spearheaded a global movement to re-evaluate our relationship with alcohol. Her other works include Material Girl, Mystic World, and Sober Curious Reset. With 20 plus years as a lifestyle journalist and editor, Ruby is also the founder of a self-publishing imprint Numinous Books, and is known as a true thought leader in the New Age wellness.

So I am going to turn it over to the recording.

SHELLY GRELLER: Do, and I'm so glad you're part of this Alcohol is Still a Drug series. I think it's such an important topic and such an interesting topic, given your background and what's taken place with this whole concept of Sober Curious.

So I will kind of turn it over to you. This is Ruby Warrington. She's the author of Sober Curious, amongst other books.

But Ruby, I'm curious what your background, what brought you to this. I guess you spearheaded this movement around a relationship around Sober Curious, and what it means for folks that are looking at their use of alcohol, and what that means for us.

So if you want to just give us a bit of your background, as well as explaining a little bit more of the background around Sober Curious.

RUBY WARRINGTON: Yeah, sure. Thank you, Shelly. So I coined the term Sober Curious around 2015 to describe what was my own evolving relationship with alcohol.

And I'd been in this process of really questioning my drinking for about five years before that point. But it had been a very internal and private sort of questioning, almost subconscious. But it had become, steadily throughout my 30s, harder and harder to ignore the overall impact of my drinking on my life. But what hadn't happened was finding myself in a classic sort of rock bottom situation with drinking. Or any kind of scenario, actually, that really suggested that my drinking was a problem. I was a normal, social drinker. I drank as much if not less than the majority of people in my social circle.

And so it was very hard for me to marry the kinds of issues and the kind of questions I was having about the actual impact of alcohol on my overall well-being with what I knew and what was kind of widely out there in the cultural narrative around what we consider to be problem drinking or alcoholic drinking, for example. I didn't really see myself as a candidate for AA or a 12-step program based on what I, as an outsider knew about those programs at this point in time.

And so it's been very interesting over the past five years as I've begun speaking publicly about my not quite an alcoholic, not quite problem drinking, drinking problem in the wider sphere. And just noticing actually how this term Sober Curious has really caught fire and has really been adopted so broadly all around the world now.

Has actually made me realize that many, many, many more people than I had ever realized or that might have even had the language to describe it before, we're actually in this questioning process. And I think that what we're now sort of calling the Sober Curious movement had actually been bubbling for a long, long time.

Or maybe not a long, long time, but had sort of been there in the background for quite a long time before I came up with that terminology. And then actually the term Sober Curious just gave people language for something that was very much already in the public consciousness, if that makes sense.

Some people have called this the kind of alt sobriety movement, as well. And ultimately, it's an alternative approach to what we have, until very recently, thought of as the path, the treatment for any kind of alcohol problem, which would be rehab, abstinence-based recovery programs, 12-step programs, et cetera.

But given what we have perceived, also, as problem drinking up until very recently, those programs and those centers and those treatment plans have not felt appropriate for a large majority of people who find themselves questioning their drinking, if that makes sense.

So yeah, my background, as I described, I was just what I would have called a regular social drinker, meaning I drank three to four nights a week, always when I was socializing. I never drank alone. I never drank in the morning when I woke up. I never had the shakes from alcohol, but I did have some very negative consequences from my drinking.

And it was actually only when I started getting serious about putting down the alcohol and stepping away from that lifestyle that I realized how very attached I was, actually. How addicted I was to this substance.

So yeah, like many of us who are kind of normal drinkers. And again, I laugh when I say it, because I think for so long, we've had this idea that you're either a problem drinker, which means abstinence, AA, recovery. Or you're a normal drinker, but I think what's emerging is a much more nuanced picture. And many, many more shades of gray along this spectrum of problematic drinking.

SHELLY GRELLER: I mean you would describe yourself as being a very functional drinker, I guess, for lack of a better term. And you didn't really have any negative consequences that were associated with your drinking, would you say, or?

RUBY WARRINGTON: Yeah, I guess I many of us have heard that term, high functioning alcoholic. I would never have thought that I was an alcoholic because I had a very clear picture in my mind of what that looked like, and it didn't look like my life in any way, shape, or form.

But yeah, I had some quite, when I look back now, serious. What I would now consider serious problems as a result of my drinking. Hangovers that would last for days. Planning my whole week and deadlines around when I would be hung over and unable to show up in the way that I needed to show up. Serious gut issues that I didn't realize were actually connected to my drinking until after I stopped, having already tried cutting out all of the other things. The dairy, the gluten, all the things. Turns out it wasn't that. It was the alcohol.

But yeah. I wouldn't have ever thought of myself as a high functioning addict, because I didn't see myself as an addict. And I think partly that's because alcohol is not really perceived-- to speak to the subject of the series. Alcohol, we don't really perceive it. We say drugs and alcohol. We don't see alcohol as

an addictive drug in the same way that we do other substances that we might have in that category.

And that's partly to do with legality and partly to do with how widely it is used. Socially acceptable alcohol use is even problematic alcohol use.

SHELLY GRELLER: So what was your tipping point? I mean, what brought you to this whole concept of being Sober Curious? What led you to this journey, in saying, you know what? I have to really take a serious look at my drinking, and where I'm at. And I'm curious about it, I guess.

RUBY WARRINGTON: Well, like I said, there wasn't a dramatic rock bottom moment. It was more like just a growing awareness that became harder and harder to ignore about the overall negative impact of alcohol on my life. And actually, it was when I started to take longer and more sustained periods of abstinence, and notice how much better I felt without it, that I began to realize what an impact it had been having. And it was actually feeling the benefits of not drinking that became the biggest influence, I suppose, on my drinking choices going forward.

And over the period of the past, honestly, 10 years, I've been backwards and forwards with that. And monitoring it and gaining more awareness and consciousness around my drinking. To the point where I now no longer use alcohol at all. But I haven't ever counted days. I don't have a sober anniversary. I don't really even consider myself sober. I don't really use that word to describe myself.

The path I have been on is why I have turned Sober Curious. And that, for me, is really about just getting conscious and becoming curious. And questioning, literally, everything to do with my relationship with alcohol, whether it's my cravings. Whether it's my urges to drink, whether it's what triggers those. Whether it's why it's sometimes so hard not to drink. Whether it's the expectations other people have around what I am and am not drinking.

Just really observing all of that stuff, and becoming conscious about all of my behaviors with regards to this substance.

And so slowly and steadily over this period, I've got extremely familiar with my relationship to alcohol, to the point where now, like I said, I don't have any use or need for it in my life. But there wasn't a big aha moment, necessarily. More so, it was just a series of realizations over a period of time.

SHELLY GRELLER: That's interesting because I know or you talk a bit about this path of self-discovery in your work and your talks. And that, to me, is interesting in how you talk about your journey with self-discovery and how it's related to this whole notion of Sober Curious. And what it's like to be on this path of sobriety, and you feel so much better.

But can you speak a little bit more about your path to that? And as more time goes on the better you feel. And your triggers, maybe they don't lessen, but it's just different, maybe, for you?

SHELLY: Yeah, well it is interesting. So this being Sober Curious, and being in this active inquiry around drinking and other substance use and other addictive behaviors, let's say, or habitual behaviors, did coincide with me moving to the US.

And I started another project called The Numinous, which is an online platform that was investigating or reporting on all sorts of different tools for, as you describe, self-discovery. Everything from yoga, meditation, to more mystical tools like astrology, the tarot, and different healing practices.

And it was actually during this time period, engaging with many of these practices, that I just started to develop a much deeper sense of awareness around who I am on the inside. And all of the places where I had been compensating for some sort of a perceived or felt lack in my emotional, mental, spiritual life. That I'd been reaching for alcohol and other substances and behaviors to sort of compensate for or medicate in some ways.

And so it was becoming really aware of who I am, what I need, the places I hadn't been willing to or ready to look at in my life, in my history, et cetera, et cetera. What you could call a healing path, I suppose, has been happening concurrently with this reevaluation of my alcohol use.

So yeah, while there wasn't, like I said, a specific tipping point, that's definitely been a part of this whole process.

We've had a real explosion of interest and awareness in wellness, and particularly mental health and mental and emotional well-being over the past five or six years, I suppose. And I think that lots of people who are Sober Curious now are coming to their Sober Curiosity because they're looking for ways to address perhaps mental and emotional health issues that they're now realizing are very much interlinked with their drinking habits. Which I just think is a really interesting development in the whole sobriety space.

SHELLY GRELLER: Yeah, there is so much more awareness around one's wellness and mental health, which feeds into a lot of this, which is great. But again—

RUBY WARRINGTON: And just to kind of jump in there again, I think because alcohol is legal, very widely available, very much marketed as something we can use to relax, we can use to feel better about ourselves, we can use to unwind, we can use to feel good, oftentimes it's overlooked as a contributing factor in terms of anxiety, depression.

In fact, alcohol use exacerbates these conditions. And we usually don't think about that because of all of the reasons I just described. So it takes a lot of

awareness and a lot of consciousness, and a lot of willingness to actually walk your own path and make your own choices. Versus all of the kind of conditioning that we have around alcohol, if you want to actually discover for yourself the benefits for mental health and well being in particular of removing it.

SHELLY GRELLER: Yeah. And we use alcohol for celebrations. Somebody's getting married. We use it at funerals. Somebody's sad. It's so interesting how it's a substance that is so, like you said, accepted, and it's part of our social norms anyway. So that's interesting.

Do you think Sober Curious can apply to other substances or other aspects of one's life?

RUBY WARRINGTON: In its purest form, being Sober Curious, like I said, really means just choosing to question our usage, our beliefs, our conditioning, the expectations, the cultural messaging around alcohol. And that questioning process can be applied to anything and everything, I believe. I've applied it to social media, to email, to various issues around food, to TV, all of these different kind of things which we can use to self soothe or to changed the way we feel or block out the things we don't want to feel, et cetera, et cetera. That questioning process we can be engaged in with regards to any of these different areas of life, I think.

And so much of it like I said is about developing conscious awareness of places in our life where we might just be going through the motions, or just going along with the way things are, without questioning. This is very applicable with alcohol.

We live in a dominant drinking paradigm. And so it is very much the norm to drink. We're not encouraged to question our drinking. But like I said, we can kind of apply this sort of approach to anything in our lives.

However, as much as alcohol is a highly addictive substance. Again, something we don't think about. Alcohol is actually up there with the top. It's up in the top five in terms of most addictive substances. There are, for example, opioids, heroin. There are substances which have a much higher rate of physical addiction.

And so I think it's tougher to be curious, for example, when we're up against a substance that has a very kind of strong physical addictive quality. Although alcohol, like I said, is very physically addictive. But a lot of the habitual use is mental as much as physical.

SHELLY GRELLER: Well, alcohol so insidious, too. It becomes part of your life or your lifestyle and then over time-- and it could be it could be fast for some, or slower. But it is insidious.

And so I'm curious why do you think alcohol is so prevalent? Is it for that reason, because it's so socially accepted? Or are there other reasons that you think?

Did you ever find yourself like, oh, I'm going to be boring if I don't have a drink? Or were people—

RUBY WARRINGTON: Oh, absolutely.

SHELLY GRELLER: Were people mad that you weren't drinking? Yeah.

RUBY WARRINGTON: I think you could say, why is coffee everywhere? And I think with alcohol, as you also rightly pointed out, it's just this ever ready social lubricant. Most social situations outside of work-- although in many workplaces, also, alcohol is sort of always there. Whether we're celebrating, commiserating, whether we need to relax, whether we want to connect. It's just always there.

And I think the fact that so many of us come to rely on it as our social sort of drug of choice, in a way, just shows that it can be really hard to find ways to connect with people. I think, ultimately, when we're reaching for a drink a lot of the time, we're looking to connect.

And we haven't really learned how to do that without alcohol because it's just ever present. From the age that we become adults, it's just always there. And so it can feel very intimidating to be in social settings, let's say, without a drink in our hand.

But the other thing I'll say is that we live in a society that has a lot of stress, and there's a lot of pressure for people. And alcohol is a very quick and easy to administer escape from just the general stressors of life. It's an anesthetic. It sort of numbs down our feelings of—

It actually has similar effects on the brain as an anti-anxiety medication, for example. So it has a very quick acting, de-stressing effect, even if, actually, it's only sort of adding to our stress, because it's adding this toxic load in our bodies that we're then going to need to process the after effects off.

But yeah, I think the fact that it's so prevalent and so widely used just speaks to the fact that people have very few other options in terms of how to actually genuinely de-stress. How to genuinely connect with each other. How to genuinely experience pleasure, you know?

And so these are all much bigger questions to look at and much bigger areas for inquiry. How could we do better as a society about helping people manage stress? Manage depression? How could we do better as a society about helping people find ways to connect with each other that don't revolve around alcohol?

And these are big, interesting questions, I think, that more and more people are starting to look at. And I think, hopefully, as the conversation around the true impact of alcohol on people who don't necessarily define themselves as addicts or who haven't got that bad in terms of their problematic drinking.

As the conversation broadens and becomes more mainstream, I think looking for alternative ways to find all the things that we're looking for in alcohol will become a very interesting sort of area.

SHELLY GRELLER: That's what I love about this, is that it's just taking a step back and thinking about your life and how your life can be better.

RUBY WARRINGTON: Absolutely. So often-- I've been doing some workshops around this subject recently, some online workshops. And I've been talking a lot about how often times when we're reaching for something outside of ourselves, whether it's a drink, whether it's our Instagram feed, whether it's a series on Netflix, it's because there's something that we need.

Something that we need, which we're either not able to acknowledge, or we feel shameful about asking to have met, or we feel guilty about needing. And if we can sort of learn what it is we really need and find ways to give ourselves what we need that don't come with these horrible physical and addictive side effects, then hopefully we can find ways to feel more relaxed, feel more at ease, feel more comfortable in our bodies, feel more, feel happier about who we are and the lives that we're living.

So I've already seen in my community, in the Sober Curious communities that I've created, just this incredible ripple effect. That happens once just one person starts looking at their drinking and choosing to question and not go along with this sort of dominant drinking culture that I mentioned.

It can have a hugely positive and profound influence on the people in their immediate sphere, whether it's their friends, family, co-workers, et cetera. And I'm so excited to watch that ripple effect kind of spread out and see the sorts of changes it creates in people's lives.

SHELLY GRELLER: So I know we have to wrap things up here shortly. But I mean if you had one or message or reflection and you could leave with people. And you mentioned the Sober Curious community. I'm not that familiar with that, but I know that there's a lot around this movement, as well.

But if there are several thoughts or reflections you would leave people with around this topic, I would love to hear that from you.

RUBY WARRINGTON: I think that for anyone who thinks they might be Sober Curious, some of the first questions or things we might get curious about are, what would my life be like without alcohol? Or it might be, am I drinking too much? Or it might be, what's the actual impact of my drinking on my life? Or it might be, would like be better if I didn't drink?

And I think what I'd like to leave people with is, even if you've been asking those. Even if you had asked one of those questions of yourself, even if it's just a little subtle whisper in your ear, you have absolutely nothing to lose by answering that question for yourself. Which for me looks like taking probably quite an extended break from alcohol, and then just getting really curious about everything that comes up for you in that break.

I think it was my brother, actually, who gave me this quote. And it was just, you will never regret not drinking. And I think that's a fantastic quote. It's something that I really live by, or have. Definitely in the early days, when I was really kind of dealing with some of the more uncomfortable and challenging aspects of being a non drinker in a world where everybody drinks. It's definitely sometimes uncomfortable to be that outsider.

But I would always just remind myself, you'll never regret not drinking. And it's absolutely true. It's so simple. But actually this is a substance that once we really examine it, we don't actually need alcohol for anything. And we can have all of the things that we have been looking for in alcohol without this substance.

But it takes getting curious, and it takes actually removing it from your life, to realize just how good life can be without alcohol.

SHELLY GRELLER: And I just love that term curious, because I think it makes people curious about Sober Curious. People perk up like, what is this? What is this? So I just think it's fascinating, and I think what you're doing is great, and I'm so glad you were able to be here today.

It's curious, but it's also inspirational to hear how people can change your life and your lifestyle, and just where you're at, so.

Ruby, if we needed to get more resources or more about this topic of Sober Curious, where can people find this? Where can our audience find out more about this?

RUBY WARRINGTON: Well, there is a private Facebook group, Sober Curious Book, which has almost 5,000 members now. And people are very, very supportive, and people are sharing about their Sober Curious journeys, wherever they're at.

And that's the other thing I will say, being Sober Curious, there's no right or wrong. There's only, really, what's right for you. And the ultimate goal is for you to come to your own conclusions about whether or not this substance has a place in your life and what you're drinking life might look like. So I do want to leave people with that.

But the Sober Curious Facebook group is a place to meet lots of other people who are on this path. There are two Sober Curious books. My original Sober

Curious book, and then the Sober Curious Reset, which is a workbook, and that guides you through 100 days of not drinking. And it's got a different exercise for each day of those 100 days.

So if you want to do a really intentional break, and really get to the bottom of why you drink the way you do, and what your life could be like without alcohol, that's a fantastic resource as well.

SHELLY GRELLER: Wow. That's great. So good. Well, thank you, Ruby, again for joining us. And I could talk with you all day.

RUBY WARRINGTON: Thanks for having me.

SHELLY GRELLER: Fascinating. And we really appreciate the work you do, and spreading the word and. It's great. Thank you so much.

RUBY WARRINGTON: Thanks again.

KRISTINA SPANNBAUER: Well, thanks so much everyone for joining us. I think that we'll conclude our presentation for today, to stay on time and everything, since we're at time now. If there are any last minute questions, we'll keep it open for just a minute longer so folks can make sure to get those in there. We'll send all the questions off to Ruby and have her respond in answers.

And post that, along with the recording to our websites. You can expect that to happen within about a week's time.

So thanks again. Have a great day we hope to see you on our future sessions of Alcohol Is Still a Drug the first Tuesday of every month. So please feel free to stop by for future sessions.