

# Part I

## Understanding Your Relationship with Alcohol

### Chapter 1: What Role Does Alcohol Have in Your Life?

Nearly everyone has thought about their drinking at one point or another. Just as you probably have thought about how many vegetables versus how many desserts you eat, it's perfectly normal to consider how much alcohol you drink. Of course, there's no "one size fits all" when it comes to what we eat or drink. Different amounts are going to affect different people in unique ways.

Marlene never gave alcohol much thought until recently. Before college, the first time Marlene had more than a few sips of alcohol was at a high school graduation party. Throughout college, Marlene never really felt like she needed to drink. She drank because it was a way to be social.

Even for those people who initially have a healthy relationship with alcohol, things can change over time—often without recognizing it. After Marlene and John got married, their son Jason came soon after and her life changed dramatically. During the day, while John was working long hours, Marlene spent a lot of time online. She connected with other new moms and followed several blogs related to working mothers. She felt a connection and sisterhood with some of those women online. Many shared her feelings—and her solutions. By the end of the day, especially during the "witching hour" when Jason just couldn't be comforted, she started to have a glass of wine. Just to take the edge off. She never got drunk, but pretty soon she started looking forward to that glass by around four o'clock.

After returning to work, she felt her identity split further, pulling her between her job and her family. Her increasingly demanding role at work meant longer hours, including working from home at night on her laptop, in front of the TV. Her son still didn't sleep well, making her feel even more tired and run down. To help deal with the stress of seemingly living two different lives, Marlene kept up her habit of a glass of wine each night. If John had a glass with dinner, sometimes Marlene had a second glass to "keep him company."

#### **The Discussion**

So, how much is too much to drink? When does casual drinking become problem drinking? In the United States, a standard drink contains 13.6 g of absolute alcohol. This means that one standard drink could be: (1) 12 oz. of beer (5% alcohol by volume); (2) 5 oz. of wine (12% alcohol by volume); or (3) 1.5 oz. of hard liquor (40% alcohol by volume). Research shows that men's and women's bodies process alcohol differently. These differences lead to different recommendations for how much drinking is probably OK for men and women. According to the National Institutes of Health:

- Healthy men up to age 65 should drink no more than 4 drinks in a day and no more than 14 drinks in a week.
- Healthy women up to age 65 (and healthy men over age 65) should drink no more than 3 drinks in a day and no more than seven drinks in a week.
- Patients who take medications that interact with alcohol, have a health condition that alcohol might affect, or are pregnant are advised to stick to even lower limits and/or abstinence.

In Marlene's case, most of the time she stays right at the maximum of the recommended weekly limit. Occasionally she exceeds this limit, especially when she joins her husband in a second glass of wine. Even though Marlene rarely feels drunk, the amount that she consumes weekly still puts her at risk for a variety of alcohol-related health problems.

But does Marlene have an alcohol disorder? Today, many researchers and treatment providers understand drinking in terms of a continuum. You might think of a sliding scale ranging from no drinking to drinking way too much. This change resulted in low-level alcohol problems grabbing more and more attention. A 2010 study in *Addictive Behaviors* reported that having 1–2 clinical alcohol problems elevates your risk (up to 3 times) for moving toward the more severe end of the continuum in the future. So, those occasional drinking consequences add up.

Marlene's case shows that alcohol can be a problem even when people don't have issues that reach severe clinical levels. As I will discuss in [Chapter 3](#), Marlene's drinking slowly started to create some problems for her relationship. Because she also craves a drink at the end of every day, some might view her as having a mild alcohol problem. Marlene's experience with alcohol is quite common, and her drinking behavior and the types of problems she faced are more common than problems at the more severe end of the scale.

Answering the questions in this section might help you get a better sense of whether you are at risk of having a problem with alcohol. For women who are 21 years old or older, ask yourself these questions from the AUDIT-C (To assess someone else, change "you" to "someone you know."):

- How often do you have a drink containing alcohol?
  0. Never
  1. Monthly or less often
  2. Two to four times a month
  3. Two to three times a week
  4. Four or more times a week
- How many standard drinks containing alcohol do you have on a typical day when you are drinking?
  0. One or two
  1. Three or four
  2. Five or six
  3. Seven to nine
  4. 10 or more
- How often do you have six or more drinks on one occasion?
  0. Never
  1. Less than monthly
  2. Monthly
  3. Weekly
  4. Daily or almost

Score 0 points for “Never” and “One or two”; score 1, 2, 3, or 4 for the other answer choices, respectively. Add up your score. For women, a score of 3 or higher might indicate an alcohol use disorder. (For men, it’s 4 or higher.)

Awareness of the role that alcohol plays in your life and whether it is affecting you in ways that you might not have considered is an important first step toward developing or maintaining a healthy relationship with alcohol. Whether you want to cut back a little, keep drinking but stay healthy, or eliminate alcohol from your life, keep in mind that women have great success overcoming risky drinking. The decision is yours to make. If alcohol is affecting you even a little, you might want to consider drinking less. If this is your decision, this book will help you identify some potential problem areas that could affect your ability to change. You will need to recognize and pay attention to those areas.