

Alcohol and Personal Choice

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One of the more common questions I hear from young professionals is “How do I socialize without drinking?” Simply asking the question suggests that the person has a concern about her drinking behavior, history, experience, or perhaps family risk, and would like to be able to socialize without imbibing.

Drinking is a matter of personal choice. You don’t have to drink, but when you do, it should be your choice. The primary issue is choice. Many people tell me that they “have to drink,” that there is some expectation, often from a boss or senior partner that you will join them for a drink. It could also be peer pressure, or that you can’t relax and mix with others absent “premedication” with the oldest social lubricant, alcohol.

The first decision to be made is whether or not the social function is really one you want to attend or one where your presence is expected/mandated. Avoidance of uncomfortable alcohol-laced events is an acceptable coping mechanism, but “command performances” by your employer may force participation. Doing other things, dancing, movies, music, art galleries, exercise, etc., are all reasonable alternatives; feel empowered to make suggestions.

At a minimum, I would encourage everyone to try socializing without alcohol. It provides an opportunity to get to know your self. Observing who you really are, and how you behave, fosters personal growth and will acquaint you with the filters you use for intrapersonal interactions.

The case for not drinking, especially in professional social settings, is compelling. Behaviors that were “normal” in law school may cease to be as one matures and is trying to establish a reputation as a professional. An early career lawyer should reflect on her drinking patterns and decide if she wants to make changes. My thoughts are not intended to suggest that abstinence is some virtue—but, neither is seeing the world through “beer goggles” or having to wonder if you said the wrong thing to the wrong person the morning after a Bar Association meeting, office party, or CLE seminar.

In the 18-40-year old group, 27-30% of Americans are totally abstinent. A decision to abstain can initially be difficult, but over time, the easier and more natural it becomes.

Being prepared is the best way to deal with social situations. If you don't want to drink, decide that before you venture out. Then, when someone asks you what you want, you can have your answer ready. Try: "I'm going to start with water tonight" or "I don't drink during the week." You don't owe anyone an explanation as to why you aren't drinking, and I advise against sharing. Most people won't notice whether or not you are drinking; those that push you to drink may have their own issues.

Volunteer to be the "designated driver." Your friends will appreciate the safety net and your "problem" is solved. Many bars will comp the designated driver "mocktails" all night; and, there are numerous "near beers" from which to choose. Knowing your bartender and telling her you are not "drinking" is a great way to start off the night. Tip the bartender well, and she'll take good care of you all evening.

Getting through the first part of a social meet-up is always the hardest part. If you have some "social anxiety" and are accustomed to using alcohol to lubricate the wheels, try showing up a little later. Others will already be slightly "disinhibited" by the alcohol putting some brain cells to sleep, and so you will find it easier to make conversation.

There are numerous others in your situation. Try to meet up with other people who are also planning on refrain for the evening. Once these connections are made, friendships will develop and you will build a supportive network for future socialization.

Enjoy being the sober voyeur. Friends will do and say stupid things when drunk. Learn to enjoy the sights and sounds as you scan the bar for memorable stories to share the following week or to have in your "file" for some later negotiation.

When you manage to abstain, you deserve to celebrate. The next morning, as you awaken from a good night of sleep without a hangover, enjoy the extra energy, muse over what you witnessed, and splurge on that Grande caramel frappachino. You can afford it with all the money you saved from not drinking last night!