

Part One

WOMEN WHO DRINK TOO MUCH

Quiz: Alcohol IQ*

Think you know a lot about alcohol and drinking? Take this “bar exam” on health, designated driving, fetal alcohol syndrome, drunk driving, and other alcohol-related topics. See the answers below the quiz to analyze your alcohol IQ.

Read each question and answer true or false.

1. Compared to a bottle of beer, a glass of white wine is a good choice for someone who wants a light drink with less alcohol.
2. Drinking black coffee is a good way to “sober up.”
3. The Puritans loaded more beer than water onto the *Mayflower* before they sailed for the New World.
4. The Women’s Christian Temperance Union still exists.
5. Switching among beer, wine, and spirits will lead to intoxication more quickly than sticking to one form of alcohol beverage.
6. High-protein foods such as peanuts and cheese slow the absorption of alcohol into the body.
7. The more educated people are in the United States, the more likely they are to drink alcoholic beverages.
8. Although smaller, a glass of wine contains more alcohol than a can of beer.

*This quiz was excerpted from a post created by David J. Hanson, Ph.D., of the State University of New York at Potsdam, www.alcohol.bitglyph.com (2007).

9. Distillation was developed during the Middle Ages.
10. It's okay to drive when you've been drinking, if you believe you are sober.

Answers

1. **False.** A typical glass of red or white wine, a bottle of beer, or a drink of spirits (rum, whiskey, tequila, and so on) each contains an almost identical amount of pure alcohol.
2. **False.** Unfortunately, only time will help a drunk person get sober. On average, the body needs about one hour to "burn off" any typical drink. Alcohol typically stays in your system for ten hours.
3. **True.** The Puritans, including their children, enjoyed beer, wine, and liquor in moderation. It was the rare Puritan who did not imbibe some form of alcohol.
4. **True.** The Women's Christian Temperance Union, which was formed during the Prohibition Era, is currently a nationwide organization of twenty-five thousand members and actively attempts to influence public policy concerning alcohol. For example, it is currently active in efforts to ban all ads for alcoholic beverages from TV.
5. **False.** The level of blood alcohol content is what determines sobriety or intoxication. Remember that standard drinks of beer, wine, and spirits contain equivalent amounts of alcohol.
6. **True.** Eating, especially high-protein foods, and carefully pacing the consumption of drinks can help prevent or delay intoxication.
7. **True.** The more educated people are, the more likely they are to drink.
8. **False.** The typical bottle of beer, glass of wine, and drink of spirits has about the same amount of alcohol. To a breathalyzer, they are the same.
9. **True.** The resulting alcohol was called *aqua vitae*, or "water of life."
10. **False.** Protect others and yourself by never driving when you've been drinking, regardless of how you may feel. It's always best to use a designated driver.

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My Story

There are numerous drinking memoirs in the canon of alcohol-related literature. Caroline Knapp's *Drinking: A Love Story*, *Wishful Drinking* by Carrie Fisher, and *Smashed: The Story of a Drunken Girlhood* by Doren Zailckas are a few notable examples, all of which chronicle the disintegration and subsequent rehabilitation of otherwise smart, talented women due to alcoholism. They are cautionary tales well worth reading, but this book is not about *my* drinking experiences. It is about other women who, like me, got lost in their addiction and, more important, how anyone who wants to can climb her way out of the alcoholic abyss. Yet I will share a bit about my journey as a recovering alcoholic who has subsequently devoted her life to helping others find peace and happiness through sobriety. Many people who are unfamiliar with this disease believe, as I once did, that alcoholics are not upstanding members of society. They imagine drunks as sweat-soaked hobos who populate shelters, prisons, and the streets—grisly ghosts of their formerly sober selves. Yet as this book will attest, many women alcoholics do not live under a bridge but rather under the radar. They hide their secrets from the world like flasks tucked into their purses. Alcoholics look and act like you and me. Yes, I've included a

number of despairing stories about women alcoholics that will bring tears to your eyes, but my experience as an alcoholic was not like a *Lifetime* movie. I was what is now known as a “functional alcoholic.” I spent four years hiding my drinking problem from my family, friends, and colleagues. I did not break into a million little pieces, but I did fall apart like a tipsy Humpty Dumpty and put myself back together again. I was one of the thousands of ordinary woman whom you pass on the street, stand behind in the supermarket line, sit next to at your workplace, or organize with at PTA meetings. You wouldn’t pick me out of a crowd and say, “She’s an alcoholic.” In fact, I didn’t even know that I had a drinking problem. I simply thought I drank a bit too much and could stop at any time.

An Idyllic Childhood

Another misconception about alcoholics is that all of them are products of unhappy, abusive, or emotionally deprived childhoods. If that were true, why are there so many raging alcoholics among the middle and privileged classes? I had always been a devout Christian who was committed to the spiritual principles of faith, hope, and helping others, but as anyone familiar with addiction knows, alcoholism crosses every religion, race, ethnic, or class line. The reason someone becomes an addict is deceptively simple. We drink or take drugs to cope with our pain, and, as I mentioned earlier, human suffering is universal. My sister and I had an idyllic childhood surrounded by a loving, supportive, and financially secure family. Everything had always come easy to me, both socially and academically. My father, who worked as a salesman for a large corporation, was often promoted and transferred, so we moved around a lot while I was growing up. We lived in many cities, including Baltimore, Pittsburgh, Jacksonville, and Chicago. Despite our peripatetic lifestyle, I had lots of friends and a lot of love. When I was in high school, my dad decided that he had had enough of the corporate culture, and we moved to Texas, my mom’s home state.

As a teenager I studied hard, participated in the debate team, and, unlike many of my peers, avoided alcohol and drugs. This wasn't because my parents didn't drink—they did. My dad always told me, "If you want to drink, just do it at home." Yet I was the classic geek who'd rather hang out at a library than at a bar.

After graduation, I went to college nearby and joined a sorority, whose members were also studious and serious girls like me, so I was able to continue abstaining from alcohol. Not that my sorority sisters didn't have the occasional party. When they did, I was always the designated driver. I met a guy on the debate team, and we dated all through college.

After college, I went immediately to graduate school, where I got a master's in communications. Wanting to continue my education even further, I applied for a doctoral program. In the meantime, I took a job as a teacher at a local high school. This is when my life took a downward turn. The principal at my school began to pressure me to do unethical things, such as change students' grades so they could stay on the football team. When I refused, he changed the grades behind my back. I was so young and naive, and I thought this was just the way things were in work world. I dreaded getting up in the morning and going to work, but I needed the money. Every day got increasingly worse as time went on. My boss, who was getting his master's degree, asked me to write his papers for him. As an innocent, churchgoing girl, I knew that what he was asking (actually, demanding) me to do was wrong. When I refused, he said, "You'll pay for that!"

And I did. This unscrupulous principal, who was married and twenty years my senior, started to sexually harass me by making inappropriate and flirtatious comments. He even showed up unannounced at my house one weekend. He tried to bribe me by saying, "If you do this for me, I will make things better for you here." I told a few of my friends what was going on (remember, this was the seventies, so there were no laws against sexual harassment at the time), and my boyfriend even stepped in to warn the lout to leave me alone. Yet this guy was a classic bully who would not be pushed around. I even went above his head to complain to his

supervisor, who turned out to be a card-carrying member of the Good Old Boys Club. He reacted by telling me that I was “lucky to work for such a talented boss.” I knew then that it was time to look for another job. One afternoon I was driving home after the principal threatened to fire me if I didn’t do what he wanted. I felt an anxiety attack coming on. My heart started racing, my palms became sweaty, and my head felt as if it was about to explode. I quickly pulled the car over to calm my nerves and breathe. When I got home, I called my boyfriend, who came over to comfort me. He went into our fridge and took out my roommate’s bottle of wine. At age twenty-four, I still hadn’t touched a drop of alcohol, but I was reeling from my day at work.

He placed a sympathetic hand on my shoulder. “Here,” he offered. “This will help calm you down.”

I drank the foreign substance slowly, savoring each sip. Lo and behold—my anxiety began to fade away. As the alcohol coursed through my bloodstream, my entire body began to relax. The shooting pain in my neck abated, my pulse slowed, and my headache disappeared. I stopped thinking about the unrelenting pressure of my job and for the first time in a year felt “normal.”

After that, I started buying wine and going out with friends to drink socially. I would drink a glass of wine (or two or three) almost every day in the evening after work to relieve my anxiety. Even though I was drinking every day, I never became a black-out alcoholic. I rationalized my drinking by believing that I was just like everyone else I knew. For the first time in my life I was one of the gang.

Soon afterward, I was accepted into the doctoral program at Penn State. I felt so elated that I immediately gave notice at my job. As in the movie *The Paper Chase*, I copied my acceptance letter, carefully folded it into a paper airplane, and flew it into the principal’s office, silently cheering, “I’m outta here!”

Even though I had left the job that caused me so much stress, my anxiety did not vanish. In fact, during the spring while I prepared to move to Pennsylvania, my anxiety escalated. Even though I was pursuing one of my life’s dreams, I continued to drink more

and more. At this point I didn't only *want* to drink, I *needed* to drink. It was a subtle change, but I remember it clearly. It went from "Let's go out with the girls for a nightcap" to watching the clock until it was time that I could start drinking again. I was using alcohol to self-medicate.

Now that I have studied alcohol and addiction, I know that my drinking eventually triggered my anxiety attacks. I started to second-guess my decision to move to Pennsylvania. I knew something was wrong with me, but I still didn't realize that it was my alcoholism. My attacks continued to get worse and now occurred on a weekly basis. It was always the same: my pulse would race, my hands would shake, my palms would sweat, and I felt as if someone was sticking a knife in the back of my neck. Despite these physical symptoms, I never considered going to a doctor or a therapist because I would have been embarrassed to confess my troubles to a stranger. I didn't understand that I had an alcohol problem, because the only alcoholic I had ever known was an old friend of the family, who was drunk all of the time, or the homeless people who slept on the street. So I reached for my best friend at the time, which was the bottle. Because alcohol depresses the central nervous system, it quelled my attacks. After a while, I began to drink *before* my attacks to prevent them from coming on. Had I gone to a doctor, I'm sure I would have been given a medication such as valium, but that would have been switching one addiction for another. Because I couldn't control my anxiety attacks, I decided not to go to Penn State. It cost me my doctorate in speech and communications. Instead, I got a job teaching speech and debating at a religious university in a small town in Texas. The school administrators made me sign a contract stating that I wouldn't drink, smoke, or behave in any matter that was morally suspect. I signed, of course knowing I would break that rule, because I just wanted to get on with my life and my career. Yet if you had spoken to any of my colleagues or students at the time, no one had a clue about what I was doing in private. Spiritually, I felt disconnected from God. I had no great aspiration to help others because I could not even help myself. I had no real

purpose in life but to survive the next day. All of my dreams of achievement had fallen by the wayside and were replaced with fear, anxiety, guilt, shame, and utter confusion. How did I go from the “top of the heap” to the “bottom of the barrel” in such a short time?

Thankfully, I never drove drunk when taking the debate team on a field trip to a tournament. I’d wait until I was tucked into my hotel room late at night to uncork. The pain I felt then was shame for what I was doing in secret, especially in light of my teaching at a religious institution. Despite my drinking, I did well and was given a promotion. I stayed there for several years. The last year I taught at the school, I was asked me to give the commencement address. I agreed, but I knew, even though I had no fear of public speaking, that I couldn’t do it without having a few drinks first. I ended up giving a stirring address while I was under the influence, which is both ironic and shameful. Yet the lesson I learned was that I could drink and get away with it. I was able to do my job, do it well, and still drink. I drank at home, alone, with the drapes closed in my little apartment. I felt desperate, alienated, disenchanting with the world, and afraid of everything. I was scared of failure, being found out, disappointing my parents, disappointing my friends, and not accomplishing what I thought I was supposed to. It felt like being stuck in a maze. Every day I would promise myself to do better and to get it together, and every day I failed to live up to that commitment. Every morning I’d wake up vowing that this day would be different, and every night I would pour another glass of wine and decide that *tomorrow* I would make things right again.

I felt as if the alcohol was keeping me alive emotionally. I was no longer drinking socially because I had broken up with my boyfriend, and I was living in a small town where I hardly knew anyone. My fellow faculty members were all much older than me. I lived isolated from everyone around me for a total of two years until I just couldn’t take it anymore. My pain was mental, emotional, social, and spiritual. I was disgusted with myself for abandoning my spiritual and moral beliefs. The only thing I had going

for me was my physical health, which was also failing because I started to gain weight, especially in the last few months of my alcoholism.

I decided to quit my university job and move to Dallas, where I got a job as a recruiter for a technology company. I led some communication seminars, which I enjoyed, but my drinking made it difficult for me to continue public speaking. During the last six months that I drank, I was headed toward my bottom. A physical addiction had taken hold. I kept getting headaches and felt nauseated because my body craved the alcohol. At this point, I was drinking not because I *wanted* to but because my body *needed* it to stave off the withdrawal.

On a typical day, I would get up in the morning and have a screwdriver (vodka and orange juice) before going to work. I'd eat lunch in my car by myself, where I would mix vodka in with my Sprite. I was starting to fall apart physically and emotionally. My parents were worried about me, not because they knew I was drinking, but because they could see that I was depressed. Not only was I isolating myself from friends, I stopped coming home for the holidays. My family insisted that I get some medical help. I finally agreed to see a doctor, who asked me whether I drank alcohol, which is a routine question during a physical examination. I lied and said, "The usual amount." Yet he called me a few days later after getting my blood test and said, "I think you are drinking too much. Your enzyme levels in your liver are elevated. You might not think that you are drinking too much, but your body isn't tolerating the alcohol well, so cut back."

I feigned surprise and agreed to cut back. He asked me to call him in a few weeks. I was frightened by what the doctor said, which only added to my shame and anxiety. That was my first revelation that I had a drinking problem. I was now twenty-eight, and after four years of drinking I thought that I couldn't stop. I wanted to stop, but I just couldn't. I didn't know how. "What's wrong with me?" I asked God. "Why am I drinking every day?" I prayed for answers. I was tired of fighting. I was tired of fighting the shame and the guilt.

My Recovery

What alcoholics like us have in common is that we consider alcohol the acceptable means of coping with situations we find uncomfortable or unbearable. It's a lot easier to pour a glass of wine than it is to see a therapist or a clergy member or to look deep inside yourself to discover what is driving you to drink. Alcohol is a friend you call on when you feel ill equipped to handle things yourself.

The tipping point for me was the day one of my college sorority sisters came to town for a visit. When I opened the door, she took one look at me and said, "My God, what has happened to you!?" I had gained thirty pounds, even though I had stopped eating, and I looked a mess. Her reaction prompted me to break down crying, and I spilled out my story to her. My friend, who also knew my sister, called her to say how worried she was about me. My sister immediately alerted our parents. Within a week, my father showed up at my house. That was on Father's Day 1979. He said, "We're worried about you. We know something is wrong, and we want to help you."

I was at a loss for what to say. I didn't want to admit that I was an alcoholic, so instead I said, "I think Betty Ford and I have something in common."

Somehow, having a woman of her stature come out about her alcoholism made it easier for me to admit my own problem. I've always been grateful to her for that, and later in my career as a recovery counselor I had the opportunity to tell her in person when she came to Texas Tech to speak at the university. I was hosting a reception for her at my house, and I told her that she helped me give a voice to what I was struggling with.

Finally, I decided to do the right thing. I took a leave of absence from my job, packed my bags, and signed myself into a medical treatment center the next day. I didn't tell a soul where I was going. I was afraid to go because I didn't know whether I was going to be locked in a room to sweat it out, similar to a scene from *The Lost Weekend*, or what was going to happen. As it turned out, I

loved treatment! It was like an awakening for me. The first two days I was given medication to help me withdraw from the alcohol. (Alcohol is one of the most dangerous substances to detox from because withdrawal can actually produce seizures.) After the third day, I woke up feeling great. It had been so long since I had actually woken up without any chemicals in my system. This was one incentive for me to stay sober. I looked forward to each day. My head was clear, and I was happy for the first time in years. Part of the reason my mood was so elevated was because I hadn't been ingesting a depressive drug.

I went to group and individual therapy, as well as to recovery-oriented meetings. The doctors wanted us to meet someone in the community who might offer to be our sponsor after leaving the treatment center. At the time, I was one of only three women in my group, and I was the youngest and most educated by far. Yet my fellow patients were lovely people, and we formed strong bonds and friendships.

At the hospital, the staff let me continue running (which really helped my recovery). I had been an avid runner, so every morning they discharged me from the hospital and let me run around the nearby park. They needed to fill out a lot of paperwork to allow me to do this, but they never once complained or worried that I was a flight risk. Running was (and still is) one of my greatest coping mechanisms. It helps relieve my anxiety and clears my head whenever I face the bumps and dings of everyday life.

My counselor there was an exceptional person in so many ways. Her name was Irene, but many of us jokingly called her the "Big Book bitch" because she walked and talked the *Big Book*, the official title for which is *Alcoholics Anonymous*, and would quote it chapter and verse. If someone stepped out of line, she'd say, "You'd better read step two again." We were encouraged to read every morning and to say a daily prayer or meditate. I still start every day this way as often as I can.

By following the steps I learned in recovery, I realized that I was sick, why I became sick, and what I needed to do to get well. I read, I listened, and I followed every word. One day, Irene took

me into a room where a woman was dying. She lay there, jaundiced from liver damage. Irene introduced me to the woman and told her I was a new patient. I asked her how she was feeling and did my best to comfort her, but inside I was horrified. After we left, Irene turned to me and said, "That could be you someday." That was all it took. Five weeks later I was discharged from treatment. After I got out, there were times, I admit, when I thought, "A small glass wine isn't going to hurt me." Yet I remembered what Irene had said and pictured that dying woman and knew that I needed to treat my disease seriously. Alcoholism is chronic, which means you can never be fully "cured." It stays with you for the rest of your life. I wondered, however, whether my anxiety would go away so that I wouldn't have a desire to drink again. It didn't go away immediately, but I learned how to manage it in healthier ways. I never took medication, for example, after my initial detox. Even after I broke my shoulder last year and underwent surgery, I asked the doctor to treat me with as few painkillers as possible. I didn't want to substitute one addiction for another. I continue to have a very healthy respect for the disease of addiction.

I decided that I would choose life over alcohol. My discharge planner suggested that I not return to Dallas, where I had no support network for my recovery, and to pursue my doctorate at Texas Tech in Lubbock instead, which is where I am now. Penn State was just too far away from the recovery contacts whom I had met in Texas. By the time I got out of treatment, I had a group of friends who were recovering alcoholics, and support groups, as you will learn, are essential to the recovery process.

I was discharged in July and started my doctorate in August. I switched my studies from communications to human development and family studies, with a focus in addiction. I had found my calling, and my communications degree helps me to spread the message through education and counseling. I got a teaching fellowship and began to study alcoholism in families and adolescents. One day the hospital where I had been treated called me about a fifteen-year-old girl who was a full-blown alcoholic. She had just checked in, and the hospital staff member asked me whether I

would talk to her. We got her into a recovery program, and I became her mentor. While working with this girl, I discovered that teenagers use alcohol as their coping mechanism during adolescence—a subject that became my dissertation and specialty.

Sadly, out of the fifteen people I was with in rehab, I was the only one who made it. One relapsed after six weeks. Another made it a year and a half before drinking again. The counselors warned us that potentially only one out of the group would make it, which is a horrifying statistic. Why was I so successful when others weren't? Why was I able to stop drinking? People think they are different—that they can do it on their own—but it's about learning new and better ways to cope with your pain, which I hope this book will show you how to do. I used exercise, talk therapy, meditation, prayer, and the support of friends, family, and mentors to help me cope with my pain and nurture my recovery.

I also listened to what the experts told me to do. If you do what the counselors and the recovery literature tell you, if you follow the suggestions—it works. If you talk to people who have relapsed, they'll tell you that they quit going to recovery meetings or stopped having quiet time or reading the recovery literature. I also maintained a strong spiritual foundation that continues to support me to this day. And every time I see an alcoholic, I say, "There but for the grace of God . . ."

Another thing that helped me was forming a social network, a community that values similar principles. I don't hide from alcohol. Many of my friends and family members continue to drink. To balance that out, though, I also surround myself with people in recovery. My husband, for example, who was never a drinker, and I live a happy, sober life together. I took a hard fall, but I developed the skills that allowed me to get up again. I'd love to say that I was smart or special, but the truth is that I had the grace of God, a supportive family, healthy relationships, a successful career, and a wonderful recovery program, all of which helped me get back on my feet again.

I also found a sponsor, and I followed her advice. She had been sober twelve years when I met her. If she had told me I needed to

crawl down the highway on my hands and knees to stay sober, you would have seen me crawling out on the road. It is about having the desire and the will to live a better life than you have now and finding someone who can show you how to do that. This is why treatment centers often hire people who are in recovery. If a facility's employees haven't experienced the pain of addiction, patients will say, "You don't know what I've been through." It's similar to veterans who can identify only with those who have seen combat.

After getting my doctorate, I worked at a psychiatric hospital for thirteen years as the director of its adolescent substance abuse program. Later I went into private practice, working with women and families who had issues with addiction. I was happy with my work and with my life, but an administrator at Texas Tech University approached me about running the school's center for addiction and recovery. He said, "You touch people every hour several times a day in therapy. If you come here, you can reach hundreds and thousands of people."

That was all it took. I quit my practice and went to Texas Tech, where I have been the director of the Center for the Study of Addiction and Recovery for the last ten years. At the time, it was one of only three in the United States. Now we have twenty programs at other universities around the country. We have a national database for research and a national foundation for collegiate recovery, which we share with other colleges. My goal is to have a collegiate recovery community in at least one college in every state, where thousands of students can learn how to stay clean and sober while continuing their education.

This is my thirty-second anniversary of sobriety, so I feel as if I've come full circle, from being a young graduate struggling with addiction to helping others live the best lives they can. It is about second chances. If you made a bad choice, you don't have to live with it the rest of your life. My hope is that you or someone you love will have a second chance, which I got and which everyone deserves. I believe with all of my heart that if you want to sober up, you can do so as long as you get with the program, whatever program you choose. Whether it's twelve steps or another program,

twelve step–focused or not, it doesn't matter as long as it works for you. I promise that anyone who embraces humility, gratitude, and a willingness to do whatever it takes to stay sober will never touch another drop of liquor and will live the life he or she was put on this earth to live.