

health problems

Hidden addiction: Life as a high-functioning alcoholic

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In denial ... better educated women are among our biggest drinkers. *Source: Supplied*

“I’VE f***ed up, s***, I’ve f***ed everything up so badly.”

Even when Angelina* had just about hit rock bottom she still found room for denial.

The Sydney professional believed her drinking habit had truly ruined her life and spent parts of her hung-over bus trips into the city to start her well-paying, respected job fantasising about reincarnation: “I thought I’d f***ed this life up so bad, I felt like maybe there was a chance I could just do better.”

But even between cursing her mistakes, she’d tell herself it wasn’t so bad. The 40-year-old was a medical professional. She had a good job and had worked so hard to achieve every success, so didn’t she deserve to have fun too? Some relief? Didn’t she deserve a drink every so often?

“In my upbringing I was taught very much about how you presented yourself and on the surface everything looked fine. I’d never made a major mistake at work, thank God. I thought, I’ve got this all under control, I’m really successful, I can hold it together.

“There’s no way I’m an alcoholic.”



Every week Angelina would pledge to go alcohol free, by 5pm she'd be thinking 'white or red?' Source: News Limited

Like many educated Australian women, Angelina had spent most of her 30s in complete denial about her alcoholism, unaware that she fit the profile of a high-functioning alcoholic just about perfectly.

Rather than drinking from a paper bag, passed out on a park bench, the face of addiction in Australia is increasingly becoming harder to spot, more sophisticated, and closer to that of a successful, well-educated woman.

According to [research from the University of Western Sydney](#), 16 percent of midlife women are alcohol dependent, and researchers believe 33 percent are misusing alcohol.

In NSW, alcohol is the primary reason people seek treatment for addiction, and a report from the [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development](#) highlighted the heaviest drinkers in developed countries are wealthier, better educated women, and less educated men.

Angelina's spiral into drink-dependence that eventually landed her in rehab is typical of a professional young woman.

She'd spent her 20s working hard and once she had a secure job, was making good money and started associating with others keen to celebrate their success, she "really started to go for it".

"I just felt like I'd spent my 20s really building up my career, I was a high achiever, got the jobs I wanted, really highly skilled by the age of 30 and I thought 'I deserve to have a good time'," she says.

"It's easy to fall into a lifestyle in a place like Sydney where it's got that glamorous edge. There are parties everywhere so you go out all the time, you drink wine, you try some coke and pills. I was hanging out with other professionals — lawyers and doctors — it was like you work hard, you play hard, and it all seemed OK." Angelina partied for years and while she was constantly hung-over at work, she never drank during the day or did coke at lunch like other people she knew, so she thought it "wasn't that bad".

Eventually she withdrew from the party scene but not from the alcohol, becoming increasingly isolated and drinking several bottles of wine at home each night or with other alcoholics.

After a few years, many mistakes, and a good look around realising her relationships were only with other alcoholics, she realised she needed help. Drinking was coupled with depression and was starting to affect her work.

"Before it got too bad every Monday I'd wake up going 'OK, alcohol-free week', then by 5pm it was more like 'so, white or red?'

"Most of the mistakes in my life, in the last 15 years, are related to alcohol-based decisions or actions," the now 44-year-old says.

“I’d have anxiety when I was getting ready to go out because of the arguments that would happen, the drama, remorse, losing phones, losing wallets, feeling sheepish in front of the neighbours because they probably heard the argument at midnight. There was a lot of shame building around it, I started getting this feeling bad shit’s happening.”

Psychologist Dr Cameron Brown says Angelina’s experience, and others’ like her, should serve as a wake-up call to how Australia treats alcoholism.

“The public health response to alcohol abuse in Australia largely focuses on the working class, it’s time we challenged this and woke up to the fact that alcohol affects all part of society in a big way,” he says.

“We have this really bad habit of conflating financial success and career success to assume you’re not unwell when it comes to alcohol. What we do, unfortunately, is say your drinking is not a problem because you’ve got everything together, and because of our drinking culture, where things like wine are considered classy and socially acceptable, it’s easy to hide if you’ve got a problem.”

Other changing drug trends also reveal Australia’s drug and drinking problems are bleeding into professional circles, Dr Brown says. Addicts are getting older, women are worst affected by alcohol and drug “hot spots” are dissipating.

[According to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare](#), the age profile of people accessing publicly-funded alcohol and other drug treatment agencies is changing, with the proportion of clients aged of 40 increasing. In the last 12 months, Sydney has witnessed concerning growth rates of drug offences in suburbs not traditionally associated with illicit substance use. [Local data](#) from Warringah local government authority for instance, which encompasses Dee Why, Curl Curl and Frenchs Forest, shows drug offences almost doubled. A stressful work life and accessibility to alcohol and drugs like cocaine could be behind these trends, according to Dr Brown.

“Given that Australians work long hours compared to other countries, in many cases illicit drugs are embraced by older Australians as an ‘escape’ or relief from the stresses of working life,” he says.



Once restricted to areas like Kings Cross, Sydney’s ‘drug hot spots’ are dissipating. Picture: Bill Hearne Source: News Limited



The Cabin, Drug and Alcohol Rehab Centre in Chiang Mai. Source: *Supplied*

It's part of the reason multinational addiction treatment group [The Cabin](#) is opening its first Australian clinic in Sydney's affluent east.

Each year hundreds of Australians are paying up to \$14,000 a month for treatment at the group's [lavish Chiang Mai facility in Thailand](#), but as of this month they'll only have to travel as far as Edgecliff, just 4km from the city's CBD.

"Seeing substance abuse as a problem contained to one geographic area, age bracket or socio-economic group is misinformed, it cuts right through society," explains Josh Rosenthal, counsellor at The Cabin Sydney.

"This is why The Cabin is opening a treatment clinic in the Eastern Suburbs close to the CBD which has a large population of 'high-functioning addicts' or individuals suffering from addiction who are still contributing members of the community with jobs and families. Our location makes it convenient for this group to access treatment."

Angelina checked herself into The Cabin's Chiang Mai facility after a horror holiday season a year and a half ago and is now 17 months sober.

She found the 12-week program tough, but the hardest part was committing.

"I thought I would lose my identity. Even though I hated who I had become I thought, if I wasn't the big party girl, who was I?," she recalls.

"I remember in rehab a moment where one of the counsellors approached me because I looked so on edge, and I just told her I was worried because I didn't know how boring my life will be, all I knew was that lifestyle where you can't go out and not be on something, but she told me your life would be so much more exciting.

"I haven't gone back to that life, I've got a whole new one."

[If you need help with substance addictions, contact The Cabin Sydney.](#)

* Name has been changed to protect identity