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## The Moment You Realise You're an Alcoholic

"A good friend told me, 'Those doctors saved you for nothing'. That was painful."



By Andrei Gudu

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Romania, where I grew up, has one of the highest rates of [heavy alcohol consumption](#) in Europe. But living here, you get the impression this could never happen to you or the people you care about. [Alcoholics](#) are portrayed on TV as old men drinking crap booze to the point of incoherency and living



...asking those who don't let them to start asking themselves some tough questions.

But alcohol addiction can affect anyone, regardless of their status, gender, beliefs or age. Adrian Marcu, psychologist at the Alliance for the Fight Against Alcoholism and Drug Addiction (ALIAT), says it's more common for people to develop an alcohol problem when they are young and if they've grown up around relatives who abused alcohol themselves.

"The consumer generally has a more fragile emotional structure," Marcu explains. "In the absence of healthy alternatives to coping with emotions and social demands on their own, they turn to alcohol as a mechanism of reward and relaxation."

Most alcohol addictions start as a coping behaviour but quickly snowball into something that becomes impossible to deal with on your own. "The alcoholic wants to protect their addiction because it makes them feel good," Marcu says. "They want to think they are in control." That's why many people resort to denial ("I don't have a problem"), rationalisation ("I deserve to drink because I'm sad") and manipulation of those around them. Many become withdrawn and hide from their loved ones.

Ultimately, the recovery process begins with realising that your drinking habits are harmful to you. "The second step is taking responsibility," Marcu says. "And if you can't do it by yourself, then you can turn to friends, family, experts or support groups." Instead of seeing it as a source of shame or a weakness, addiction should be treated as a disease, one in which the person affected needs care, understanding and support – particularly when they're first accepting their diagnosis.

I spoke to several young people who've recently come to realise they were addicted to alcohol. They opened up about their stories and how they've managed to quit. Due to the stigma attached to alcohol addiction, the interviewees (except for Vlad) have chosen to use fake names.

### 'One afternoon, I had a beer on an empty stomach. That was the beginning of an alcoholic episode that lasted for almost three years'

"I come from a dysfunctional family," says Mihaela. "We had so many problems due to alcohol that I saw it as a poison, it disgusted me." After trying it when she was 17, Mihaela stayed away from booze for years. She disliked how quickly she got drunk and how bad she felt the next day.

At 28, she started drinking more and more to cope with a depressive episode. "I wanted to go out with my friends as often as possible, to be part of the noise, to escape," she says. "I drank occasionally, but I never felt well the next day, so I didn't understand why I kept doing it."

Six months went by, and she decided to quit booze. But a couple of years later, at 30, she went through a period of deep crises that made her reach

#### Alcohol

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...day. That was the beginning of an alcohol episode that lasted for almost three years."

Mihaela quickly lost control – three weeks after that first drink, she was downing beer every day, and soon after, she needed a drink within two hours of waking up. She lost her job and then her driving licence – she'd caused an accident under the influence and was taken to the psychiatric hospital in handcuffs.

"I ended up at the emergency room with liver failure," Mihaela says. "The doctors told me that if I continued to live like this, I would die. But I thought my life sucked anyway, so why stop?"

During the pandemic, Mihaela had been to a few support groups, but that didn't help. "I had no hope left, I was just waiting to die," she says. On New Year's Eve, even though she was drunk, she decided to reach out to [Alcoholics Anonymous](#). "I don't know how, but the next day I woke up with a desire to quit," she says. "I was willing to do absolutely anything for it. I stayed with the support group and, as of Jan. 1 of this year, I became [sober](#)."

Mihaela managed to give up alcohol without medical intervention, but it wasn't easy and she does [relapse sometimes](#). "Even in these support groups, I felt like lying sometimes, but I realised that everybody felt the same as I did," she says.

## 'A good friend told me, "Those doctors saved you for nothing". That was painful'

Radu started drinking with his friends in high school, but didn't develop a problem until he was about to start his doctorate at age 25. "I was in a relationship and fell deeply in love, but unfortunately it ended after three months," he says. "Up until then, I hadn't been tempted by booze, but I had a roommate who kept a big stash in the dorm room. He went home for Easter and I drank everything in just a few days. That was the moment I started drinking with a purpose: to fill the void."

Soon Radu's drinking problem became chronic and began affecting his life more and more. He had to be taken to the hospital a few times because he fell on the street. "Once, I was even taken to the [Obregia Psychiatry Hospital](#)," he recalls. "It was hard for me to see that people addicted to alcohol and people with mental health issues were put in the same pot."

Radu would promise to give up alcohol, but then start all over again. The addiction cycle got so bad he tried to take [his own life](#). "I called my folks, told them I took the pills and hung up," he says. "The ambulance came and saved my life, but two weeks later, I got drunk again. A good friend told me, 'Those doctors saved you for nothing'. That was painful. I realised I couldn't do this on my own."

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finally decided and managed to admit he had a problem after the first meeting.

"I chose total abstinence, that was the only way," he says. "The sense of belonging helped me. All those people had managed to get sober together."

Radu hasn't had a drink since 2018, but still considers himself an alcoholic. "I always felt, and still feel, alone and misunderstood," he says. "That's why I constantly go to meetings – to help others by sharing my experience and giving them hope and strength. I will live with this disease for the rest of my life and convince myself I must continue every day."

## 'I went to my grandfather's vigil drunk'

Vlad began drinking at 27 after a bad breakup. "My grandpa had [Alzheimer's](#), my family was on the brink of despair, anxiety was my middle name," he says. "In short, I chose to self-medicate with alcohol."

When his grandad was admitted to an institution, Vlad's drinking ramped up. At one point, he was supposed to meet with his grandad's psychotherapist to pay him but ended up swinging by his local supermarket first. "The lady I usually get my cheese and eggs from was selling homemade brandy," he says. "By the time I got to [the psychotherapist], I had already drunk half a litre. 'Be careful, I can tell you've been drinking,' he warned me. I felt so ashamed."

His grandad died six months later. Vlad couldn't answer the phone that morning because he was passed out from a binge the night before. "I went to the vigil drunk," he says. "No matter how anxiety-provoking the experience was, Grandpa didn't deserve to have me be like that."

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For the next two years, Vlad continued drinking cheap booze diluted with water or juice; a shot every few hours to cope with the anxiety. "That's how it is when you only care about drinking and you're poor," he says.

He then began to give up alcohol gradually, only drinking with meals – although he did have a few relapses during the pandemic. Since 2021, he only drinks occasionally – "a beer every three or four days," he says.

"I haven't gotten really drunk in years," Vlad adds. "Psychotherapy worked best for me. Meanwhile, I can say I am out of the drunkard's club. Looking back, I don't regret my experiences."

## 'When my friends tried to tell me that I had a problem, I told them that it was my way of relaxing'

"I started drinking alcohol when I was little – I was always given a sip before meals to increase my appetite," says Alexandra. "My father was an addict, so I probably got it from him."

Alexandra's drinking problem started in her early teens. Once, at home, she



...mother held my tongue so I wouldn't mention it, she says. "She didn't want to call the ambulance because she was afraid our neighbours would find out. Luckily, I recovered."

In university, Alexandra's drinking became a daily habit. Over time, she came to drink up to eight beers, or more than a bottle of wine, each evening. "I didn't realise it at the time, but I had become addicted," she says. "When my friends tried to tell me that I had a problem, I told them that it was my way of relaxing. I lied to them, and I also lied to myself."

Around the age of 30, the first health problems appeared. "I was putting on weight, sleeping horribly, I couldn't verbalise what I was thinking," she says. "Now I see the difference, but back then I had nothing to compare it to because the toxicity had become a habit."

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Alexandra managed to quit for two weeks, but couldn't eat anything. She lost a lot of weight, went to therapy, but started drinking again. "After gaining weight very quickly, I became stiff whenever I did a sudden movement," she says. "The doctors told me the pressure on my spine was too high, so I started exercising to lose weight."

Last year, Alexandra realised she couldn't continue drinking and exercising at the same time. She first coped with withdrawals by occasionally swishing a sip of wine around in her mouth without swallowing, but within six months, she didn't have to do that anymore. "I managed to drastically reduce my consumption to a normal level," she says. "I still drink sometimes, but only at social events. I've reached a balance."

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