

# SUMMARY

BY ALYSSA BURNETTE

## THE UNEXPECTED JOY OF BEING SOBER

BY CATHERINE GRAY



# **Summary of The Unexpected Joy of Being Sober by Catherine Gray**

**Written by Alyssa Burnette**

Learn why more people are experimenting with  
being “sober-curious.”

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## Introduction

On his standup comedy show, *New In Town*, comedian John Mulaney remarked that he had given up drinking. He then provided the audience with a few tips he had gleaned from his own experience and said: "I don't know if anyone here is thinking about quitting drinking, but you need to know 2 things if you're thinking of quitting drinking.

The first is that when you stop drinking and you still go to parties where people are drinking, they will have no idea what to offer you. Like, once people start drinking for the night, they forget everything that isn't alcohol. Like, I'll show up at a party and they'll be like, "Hey everybody! Alright we got Coronas in the fridge and oh, hey Mulaney! Would you like an old turnip we found in the cabinet? Would that be good for you? Would you like that? I know you don't drink... Or my girlfriend left a NuvaRing in the fridge, would you want that? Would that be good for you? I know you don't drink!"

But in addition to the awkwardness, Mulaney observes that there are other negative social side-effects to giving up alcohol. He also jokes that, "If you quit drinking you're about to lose the greatest excuse in your life, which is, "I'm really sorry about last night. I was just too drunk..." That is a get out of jail free card that you don't even realize you've had until you lose it. I can't say that anymore. I can never be like, "Sorry about last night, I was just so drunk." Now I have to be like, "I'm really sorry about last night, it's just that I'm mean and loud... It probably will happen again."

Now, this makes for a pretty funny comedy routine, but that's because it's so true! Whether you live in the US or the UK, social drinking is a significant part of our culture. In fact, it's so common that you're considered weird if you don't drink! And as a result, many people feel pressured to drink even when they dislike alcohol or when they suffer unpleasant side-effects from alcohol. And that's exactly why the author

wrote this book! Because, contrary to the pressure of public opinion, alcohol isn't a requirement for being or having fun! And over the course of this summary, Catherine Gray's research will prove that being sober doesn't have to mean being somber.



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## Being Sober Curious

NPR recently reported that “the ‘sober curious’ or ‘sober sometimes’ movement started in the UK as a challenge for those who felt they'd partied a little too hard over New Year's weekend. First there was "Dry January," when people could brag on social media about how they were taking a break from booze. Now there's "Dry July" and even "Sober September." And the movement has spread across the U.S., with people challenging each other to see what life is like without alcohol and share in that experience.” Although that might sound pretty boring, studies show that it’s actually making people happier and healthier!

For example, NPR observes that “a 2016 British study of about 850 men and women who volunteered to abstain from alcohol during Dry January found that participants reported a range of benefits. For instance, 82 percent said they felt a sense of achievement. "Better sleep" was cited by 62 percent, and 49 percent said they lost some weight. Another study published last year by researchers in Britain compared the health outcomes among a group of men and women who agreed to stop drinking for one month, with the health of a group that continued to consume alcohol.” Aaron White is the senior scientific adviser to the director at the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism and he closely examined the results of that study. In his report on the study’s findings, White affirmed that “at the end of that month — just after one month — people, by and large, lost some weight. They also had improvements in insulin sensitivity, their blood pressure numbers improved and their livers looked a little healthier.”

Those might not seem like significant health benefits but White argues that these small changes can make a big difference in your overall quality of life. The author observes that these studies and the health improvements they signify are relevant to her research because health is one big reason why people join the “sober curious” movement. Put simply, people feel better when they don’t drink alcohol! And if you’ve ever woken up with a wicked hangover, you know just how true that is. Drinking might be fun when we feel giggly and tipsy, but the after-effects are never enjoyable. (And that’s not

even counting the weight gain or what alcohol does to our skin, blood sugar, and teeth!) However, Gray confirms that being sober might not feel so fun at first if you've grown physically dependent on alcohol. Everyone handles alcohol differently, so if you typically have at least two drinks a day, you may be physically dependent on it and you might not.

But if you are, then it's highly likely that you'll experience some unpleasant physical side-effects when you stop drinking. For example, you might experience nausea, queasiness, or a sensation of generally feeling ill. Similarly, if you've used alcohol to help you cope with depression or anxiety, you may suddenly start feeling more anxious if you're no longer using alcohol as a crutch.

The popular mental health website VeryWellMind explains this process by unpacking the effects of alcohol on the brain. Alcohol helps us to relax because "it increases the effects of GABA, a neurotransmitter responsible for creating feelings of calm and euphoria. It also decreases glutamate, another neurotransmitter that creates excitability.

Heavy drinking makes it harder and harder to increase GABA and decrease glutamate, so more and more alcohol is required for the same outcome. Your body becomes accustomed to these changes and responds by producing more glutamate and less GABA. When you suddenly stop drinking, you are no longer impacting these two neurotransmitters, but your body is still over producing glutamate and underproducing GABA. As a result, you may become hyper excited: anxious, restless, and shaky. If you were a heavy drinker, your symptoms may be much more severe, progressing to tremors, seizures, and serious high blood pressure."

Obviously, these sound like some pretty unpleasant withdrawal symptoms. But don't be dissuaded! The author affirms that these side-effects only last for about ten days at the absolute maximum. It may be tough for a little while, but the fog of withdrawal will soon clear and you'll be able to achieve a better quality of life! To give you a preview of what those benefits might be, some participants in the study cited by Aaron White explained the benefits of their



sobriety in a recent interview. For example, a woman named Kathy Kuzniar proclaimed, “I’m feeling creative again. I feel calmer. I’ve lost over 30 pounds. And I know I wouldn’t be doing those things if I was still drinking.” Another member, Stephanie Forte remarked, “One thing that was noticeable to pretty much everybody was my overall health and, like, my skin, my eyes. ... I lost weight, I just felt better!” Who doesn’t want to feel better! But as if that’s not enough of an added benefit, the author remarks that being sober can actually decrease anxiety.

Because when it comes to alcohol-related anxiety, we’ve all been there: it’s the morning after and you’re doing the frantic check of your phone, keys, wallet, and bank card. It’s that anxious morning ritual of: “What did I say? Who did I text? What on earth did I do last night? How did I spend that much money? Did I make it home with my wallet and phone?” Wouldn’t it be great to rid yourself of that anxiety?



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# Why Hangovers Are Worse Than You Think

Hangovers: everybody gets them. And everybody has their own hangover cure that they swear by. Some people simply ride it out by hiding in bed with Ibuprofen and sprite in the vain hope that you can keep something down long enough for it to dull the pounding ache in your head. Others swear by a gross concoction of egg yolks and God knows what else! We lie in bed, we drag ourselves to “brunch” at 2:00 in the afternoon, we complain, and we stew in our alcohol-induced anxiety. But that’s all there is to it! For the most part, we’ve all come to believe that hangovers are just an annoying-- but normal-- part of life.

However, the author argues that nothing could be further from the truth! And although we think we feel good as new in a couple of days, it actually takes our bodies much longer to recover from a hangover. That’s because your hangover is actually the result of your body attempting to cleanse itself of literal poison. Dr. Jerrold B. Leikin is the director of medical toxicology at NorthShore University HealthSystem and he explained the effects and purpose of a hangover in an interview with the lifestyle magazine *Vice*. "As it's being metabolized, alcohol is oxidized into a substance called acetaldehyde, which makes you feel awful. Acetaldehyde is a really toxic metabolite. It's more toxic than alcohol itself in a lot of ways. If you get too much of it, you'll feel dysphoric, you'll start to feel nauseous, your head will start to hurt, and it can exacerbate depression." This might sound pretty obvious but in short, a hangover occurs because your body has absorbed more alcohol than it can handle and it’s trying to detox from the overdose of a toxic substance.

And this process is especially hard on your liver. Popular comedies like NBC’s *Superstore* and *Brooklyn Nine Nine* make frequent jokes about the effect of alcohol on the liver, so we sort of know this is a thing, but how much do we really understand about the process? Hepatologist Dr. Tarek Hassanein is the director of the Southern California Liver Centers and he has a lot to say about the traumatic impact alcohol has on our liver. In a recent interview with health publication *Eat This, Not That!* Hassanein explained that,

“Alcohol goes to your liver before all other parts of the body. While it's in your liver, your body metabolizes alcohol, and it is broken down into toxic compounds which are then distributed throughout the body.” So, that’s one reason you feel so holistically awful after a night of drinking: your liver is trying to share the burden with the rest of your body so it doesn’t have to work so hard! And unfortunately, the more you drink, the harder your liver has to work. So, although you might be tempted to grab an acetaminophen for your pounding head, painkillers like Tylenol and Ibuprofen are equally tough on your liver. When you attempt to help one part of your hangover, you’re actually making another part of it worse (and doing long-term damage to your body in the process!)

So, when you consider the effects of long-term liver strain, sleep deprivation, and inflammation of your stomach, you can only draw one conclusion: not drinking is better for your health in the long run! And hangovers aren’t as innocent as we think.



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## Alcohol is A Drug

That statement is true, but we tend to forget about it, don't we? We actively campaign to restrict our children's access to drugs and we happily criminalize substances like cocaine or ketamine, but we have no problem downing a pint (or five) in the pub. And no one seems to consider this at all hypocritical or ironic. Why? Well, the author concludes that this is because alcohol has been normalized. We might be a little surprised if popular television shows or movies advocated for the normalization of injecting dangerous street drugs, but we think nothing of it when they portray excessive drinking or imply that you can't have a party without alcohol.

That's pretty scary, given that a 2009 study found that alcohol is more harmful than heroin. Yes, as shocking as it sounds, you read that right! Alcohol really is more dangerous than heroin and we've normalized it so much that we don't even consider that danger! These results can be seen in the study's rankings which measured the danger and addictive nature of a variety of drugs on a scale from 0-100. Alcohol clocked in with a score of 72, well ahead of heroin (which was only rated 55), crack (54) and methamphetamine, which was only 33. So, as we can see from these results, alcohol is extremely dangerous, even if our social perception of it doesn't really take that danger into account. And when we consider it in light of this social normalization, we have to realize that the biggest difference which distinguishes alcohol and illegal drugs is our perception of it.

For example, many people who drink heavily would never consider taking heroin. They might worry that it would be dangerous or addictive or that their friends would perceive them differently. But because alcohol is considered normal, social, and fun, people happily partake of it or give in to the social pressure to do so. So, when we consider these factors, we have to ask ourselves the question: is drinking alcohol normal or have we

normalized it too much? Is it worth it to partake of a dangerous, highly addictive substance just because of our skewed societal perception? Would our quality of life be better without it? The author's research indicates that it would.



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## Final Summary

As comedian John Mulaney joked, your social experience can look a bit different when you give up drinking. People may be a little awkward around you. They might not know what to offer you at a party. But the author observes that that's only because our society has normalized alcohol to an unhealthy degree. In fact, many people continue drinking even when they don't want to because they're afraid of looking "weird," "boring," or "not fun." But the author's research indicates that when we make the commitment to sobriety, we find that we can actually enjoy life more.

Because when our senses aren't being numbed by alcohol and our health is better, we can have more fun! We can think clearly, enjoy a good night's sleep, and make better use of our time. And we can still enjoy the social benefits of a drink by having a mocktail with a friend! So, being sober doesn't have to mean being somber. You can take a break from alcohol and discover the unexpected joy of doing so.



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