

THE ROAD TO RECOVERY

April is Alcohol Awareness Month, a time that promotes awareness and understanding of alcohol use disorder and alcohol-related issues.

BY HANNAH WENTE

Alcohol is pervasive, especially in the Midwest. It's sold at gas stations and consumed at family gatherings, sporting events and during meetups with friends. When consumed in moderation, it can add a celebratory tone to an occasion or enhance a meal.

But many people choose to abstain from alcohol for religious, personal or health reasons. Included in that group are those grappling with alcohol use disorder (AUD)*, a chronic disease characterized by uncontrolled drinking and a preoccupation with alcohol, according to the Mayo Clinic.

Alcohol numbs the senses. Tolerance to it builds over time, meaning some don't seek help for AUD until they encounter issues with family, work or even the justice system. The road to sobriety or moderation can be a long, arduous path for those with AUD. But, it's well worth it for them.

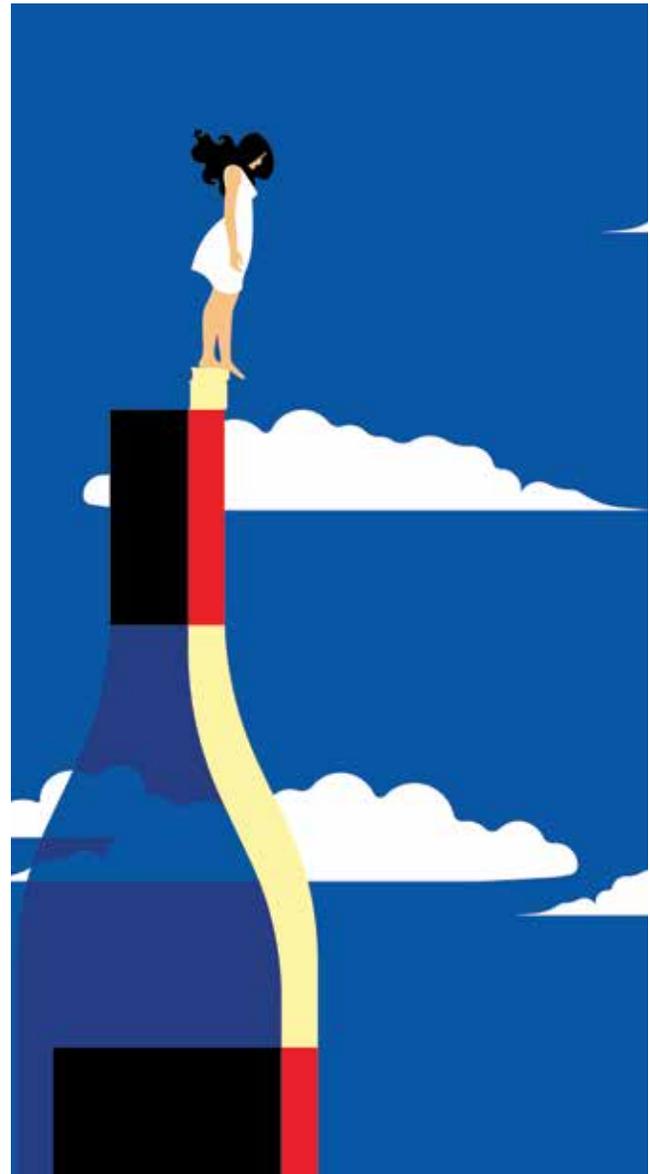
Stephanie (who asked her last name not be used) was in her early twenties when she got her first Operating While Intoxicated (OWI) violation. After two subsequent violations, she was court-mandated to join the Dane County OWI Treatment Court program. Without it, she doesn't know if she would be sober today.

"I still don't know there was ever a point where I felt like I needed [alcohol]," she says. "It was more of a want"

Stephanie didn't drink in high school but started while she was attending Madison College. The volleyball and softball leagues she participated in post-college were hosted at bars and centered on drinking with her teammates: a drink before the game, during the game and after the game.

"It's just always there and you're looked at as the weirdo if you're not drinking," she says.

According to the Substance Abuse and



Mental Health Services Administration, alcohol is the most frequently abused substance in the U.S. Approximately 95,000

deaths are attributable to excessive alcohol use each year in the U.S., according to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

Dietary guidelines for Americans recommend that if they drink, that women have no more than one drink per day, and for men, no more than two drinks per day. This is because women produce lower amounts of alcohol dehydrogenase (ADH), a chemical that helps metabolize alcohol. Women also

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*Alcohol use disorder, along with alcohol dependence or alcohol addiction, are the preferred terms for this illness. "Alcoholism" is considered a colloquial term, according to the National Institutes of Health.

have a higher ratio of body fat, which holds alcohol. Both of these mean women get drunker faster. They're also more at risk for alcohol-induced diseases like pancreatitis, and urinary, cervical and breast cancers. Women are also more likely to face trauma from date rape and sexual assault when alcohol is involved — and this trauma can resurface during recovery.

Stephanie's dad struggled with alcohol use disorder. By the time she was in her 20s, she was helping her dad out quite a bit running errands and caregiving for him — and drinking to cope with the stress. She felt it was hypocritical to talk to him about moderating his alcohol intake.

"He was an alcoholic," she says. "He was at the point where he needed it to cope with what he had made of his life. Every day he needed me to get something for him. I felt like I didn't really have a life."

It's often these challenges that cause us to drink, says Journey Mental Health President, CEO and long-time counselor Tanya Lettman-Shue. Women are sometimes closet drinkers, she says, making it harder for family and friends to recognize the signs of alcohol addiction.

"Women tend to hide their drinking [if they have a problem]," Lettman-Shue says. "If they're holding down a household and a full-time job, they are more likely to be closet drinkers."

Stephanie didn't want to burden other family members or friends with the stress she was under, helping her dad out

"I was self-medicating," she says. "I would sit at home and drink, and think, 'It doesn't matter because I'm not going anywhere.' You need more [alcohol] to get to the point to where you want to be."

Lettman-Shue notes that indeed, many people will gradually increase their alcohol consumption, while simultaneously surrounding themselves with people who reinforce the habit.

"No one ever wakes up and says, 'I'm going to grow up to be an addict,'" she says. "Your life becomes narrower and narrower over time. Your use of the substance becomes more normative. [Alcohol addiction] isn't [sudden] — it happens over time."

While Stephanie did recognize her increased alcohol consumption, it was her third OWI that really prompted her to take action: "That was the linchpin of, 'I have to change what I am doing.'"

In Wisconsin, people who have three or more OWIs are placed on probation and undergo an assessment to determine if they need to enter the OWI Treatment Court program. It involves having an interlock installed on your steering wheel, blowing into a Soberlink device four times a day (including at 7 a.m. and 10 p.m.), calling into a hotline and random urine testing. Stephanie started her sobriety journey right before the pandemic lockdown — a time which she says helped her process everything she had kept bottled inside.

"There were a lot of nights I would be crying and being



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super emotional," she says. "I would think, 'Why did I do the things that led me here?'"

Lettman-Shue says wake-up calls – an OWI, a family member saying one's behavior is no longer acceptable or blacking out – are tipping points for most people. But, no one has to wait to get to that place. She recommends that anyone concerned about themselves or a loved one should ask about the person's quality of life, work and relationships. Are they having the quality in their life they once did? Are they relying on the substance? Are they using it as a tool to cope?

"Whether it's drugs or alcohol, sex or food, we have to be thinking about the quality of our relationship to a coping mechanism and if it's healthy," Lettman-Shue says. "Most people haven't been taught those coping skills."

She also says it's critical to teach young children and adults how to recognize their thoughts, feelings and emotions, and process them in a healthy way. For those with AUD, sobriety involves learning about what tools can positively help with feelings and setbacks. As with other lifestyle changes like diet and exercise,



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sobriety takes conscious, continuous effort, on a daily basis.

Stephanie's mom and sister have been her biggest supporters – her mom has told her repeatedly, "I am here for you regardless of everything you've done."

Her graduation from her OWI program was February 11, 2022, and she has been sober since February 2020. Today, Stephanie's mother says, "I feel like I got my daughter back."

Stephanie still gets asked if she'd like a drink. But more and more, she is finding that people honor her commitment and bravery. She hopes that her experience can serve as a model for others.

"You're not alone," she says. "You're not an exception – there are a ton of other people in your shoes. You need to take a look at the path that you're heading down." ✨

For a mental health emergency, call Journey Mental Health at 608-280-2600. To schedule an initial visit about alcohol use disorder or other mental health issues, call 608-280-2720. journeymhc.org

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COURTESY TANYA LETTMAN-SHUE

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