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## MODERNAE

### When Does Happy Hour Become Unhappy Hour?

Check any social media feeds around 5 p.m., and it's likely to be a gridlock of posts that include pictures of cocktails with cheeky captions about "mommy juice" or "my happy place." While the boozy innuendos are meant to be punch lines to motherhood, statistics show that a growing number of women don't acknowledge the dangerous realities of their relationship with alcohol. According to the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), 5.3 million women have drinking habits that threaten their health. And unlike men, women are more likely to develop problems with alcohol later in life.

The exhaustive pursuit of this "ideal life"—where women effortlessly succeed at work and at home, as a wife, mother, friend and daughter, all while looking flawless—has created immense pressure for women to be everything to everyone. While we know that work-life balance is as realistic as a wish-granting unicorn, it doesn't stop us from sprinting after the possibility every day, and that cycle is creating a need for release, and the temptation for a cocktail (or five).

In 2009, Stefanie Wilder-Taylor, author of *Naptime is the New Happy Hour: And Other Ways Toddlers Turn Your Life Upside Down* and *Sippy Cups are Not for Chardonnay: And Other Things I Had to Learn as a New Mom* and one-time mascot for the cocktail-mom culture, wrote a brutally honest post on her blog, *Baby on Bored*, disclosing that she had a problem with alcohol and was quitting. She wrote, "It's embarrassing to be all 'Rah Rah Rah! Gooooo BOOZE!' only to zip off with my tail between my legs saying, 'Never mind, I've joined the other team,' but it's what I had to do."

"It's always been more socially acceptable for men to drink. However, the growing culture of 'wine moms' has given women a new socially acceptable outlet to drink more, more often—on play dates and mother's happy hours—using alcohol to unwind or as a reward at the end of the day," says **Olivera Bogunovic**, a psychiatrist at **McLean Hospital** in Belmont, Massachusetts, who specializes in addiction.

In 2014, Elizabeth Vargas of ABC's *20/20* made a public announcement on *Good Morning America* admitting that she was an alcoholic: "I started thinking I'll only drink on weekends or I'll only drink, you know, two glasses of wine a night. I won't drink on nights before I have to get up and do *Good Morning America*. But those deals never work."

Both Wilder-Taylor and Vargas said their drinking began as a stress/reward relationship; a blue ribbon cocktail for getting through another challenging day of varied demands. As alcoholism is a progressive disease, the thoughts of wine become a compulsion coupled with secrecy. "The amount of energy I expended keeping that secret and keeping this problem hidden from view was exhausting," Vargas said.

Unfortunately, this is the typical lifecycle for many women struggling with alcoholism today, says Bogunovic

“A majority of women keep the extent of their drinking habits secret,” she says. “Because women are supposed keep it all together, there’s so much shame and guilt. The secrecy created by the self blame and shame and guilt are the biggest hurdles for women in getting help.”

The NIAAA defines binge drinking as four or more drinks on one occasion for women and heavy drinking as five or more drinks on five or more occasions in any 30-day period. However, alcoholism isn’t necessarily about how much you drink but rather your behaviors when you drink. “Blackout episodes, being late or hung-over at work, an inability to perform regular life tasks, wanting/needing to numb your senses or if you regularly drink more than you planned,” says Bogunovic, “if any of these behaviors sound familiar, it’s time to take an honest look at your drinking and only you can answer whether there is a bigger problem.”

The good news is there have been huge strides in treatment. “The first step is to be honest with a primary care physician about drinking habits to get an understanding of the impacts of your drinking,” says Bogunovic. “Additionally, there is a huge correlation of alcoholism and depression and anxiety, so comprehensive and concurrent treatment can be really successful.”

She also encourages women to identify their triggers and coping strategies: Why did you over-consume? What were you feeling in that moment that you needed to “check out”? What are your coping strategies to deal with the pressures of life? These skills are crucial in maintaining health and well-being. Dr. Bogonvic stresses, “Self-care is one of the most important things for women to do—even if you’re not dealing with alcohol issues.”