

YOU ARE NOT ALONE

Principals and Vice-Principals are not immune to the use of substances or unhealthy behaviours to cope or self-soothe.

Addiction can afflict anyone, in any walk of life. High-achieving professionals can find themselves leaning on an addictive practice in order to cope with intensification and complexities in their work and personal lives. People may not recognize – or accept – that they have an affliction, until there is an intervention or a moment of clarity.

A BCPVPA member approached us with a request to share her personal story of reaching a low point, and taking control to find a way back. We thank her for her courage and hope that by sharing her story, other members may find the strength within themselves to seek help if they are experiencing a similar journey with alcohol or other types of addiction.



I AM A SCHOOL PRINCIPAL.

I am a creative woman, a loving wife and mother, and a passionate educator. I also have an addiction to alcohol.

I am 58 years old, and did not begin to address my drinking until five years ago. In August 2024, I celebrated three years of continuous sobriety; I want to share my story with you, in the hope that it resonates for those who need it.

I was born a late-in-life child of older parents in a small Canadian town. My siblings were much older than me, so I grew up as an only child. I had friends, but I always felt like I did not fit in. Sleepovers were particularly painful, but so were most group situations as I looked to others for approval. I did, however, excel at school where I thrived under structure and rules, and was placed in a gifted program after grade 2 to accelerate through elementary school.

My parents doted on me, but my dad was a functioning alcoholic throughout my childhood, and only quit drinking when I left home for university. My mom was a teacher, a gentle soul who loved me dearly and balanced protecting me from my dad's moods, with managing his moods herself.

I was drawn to working with children from a young age and by the time I was 18, I was working with children who had special needs. I was expected to be quiet at home, be an excellent student and work as much as possible. I think some of us who develop an addiction to alcohol have Type A personalities, often encouraged by our families.

I have three children with my husband of 34 years, and raising them was the highlight of my life. My husband and I were very present and supportive parents. I was determined that the family dinner table in my home would be a happy space to laugh and enjoy each other, and it was.

There was no doubt that I would work in education. I started my career at a private school for students

with autism, and it was a challenging position. Our team would head to a local pub on Fridays after work and let loose over tequila shots. I then moved to British Columbia and worked as a primary teacher. I worked in a variety of roles in several districts, including classroom teacher and inclusion support teacher before taking on the Principalship of a small elementary school.

MY RELATIONSHIP WITH ALCOHOL

As a child, I mixed drinks for my dad and remember sipping from his rum and cokes as I delivered them downstairs. After more than 40 years, I can still remember being halfway down the stairs, sipping and feeling that warm rush, followed by a softening. I loved the taste. From adolescence on, I drank. I felt good when I drank alcohol, less anxious, and more easily able to join the group. "Now," I thought, "I can fit in, and cope."

There was less information available on anxiety and mental health in the 1980s.

"Most people who fall into addiction tend to blame themselves for it, but when it comes to alcohol, there is an X factor that makes it uniquely problematic. Alcohol is both the deadliest drug and the most socially acceptable one."

(McKowen, 2023, p.20)

Over the years, alcohol became more and more necessary to manage the stress of marriage and kids, full-time teaching and, eventually, a master's program. I excelled in my career, accepting regular opportunities to enhance my skills and move ahead in the education field. I always saw my work as a measure of my worth. I would pour a glass of wine when I walked in the door to make dinner, which I did every day when working full-time. I would revel in the fact that I did not need a lunch break, or that I could work harder than many folks around me. Even though I never drank during the day, I did not understand

at the time that my evening alcohol fueled my over-functioning workdays.

When my mother died after a long stay in extended care, I really started to struggle with alcohol. Before then, I had experienced blackouts and overdrinking, but it was manageable. I was never called out on my drinking, and was never charged for impaired driving. Alcohol was a part of our work culture and drinks out were common. However, when my colleagues went home after the bar to their tea, I went home to more wine.

Around that time, I read my first memoir about alcohol: *Drinking - A Love Story* by Caroline Knaff. It resonated deeply with me. Caroline described how she always watched the height in everyone's wine glass to see who was poured more; always having a drink or two to prepare for going out; and always worrying about not having enough. I had tried to moderate my own drinking for years, constantly breaking promises to myself. I recognized my own exhaustion in hers.

Despite that, the idea of letting go of alcohol was unthinkable, and filled me with terror. And so, I kept on going. For years, I had few alcohol-free days, except while pregnant. I was an involved parent and educator, but the pull of wine in the early evening was always there, tempting me as I made dinner, read bedtime stories, or worked on reports at home.

"You just need to have that singular nagging suspicion that alcohol has robbed you of a presence you would have otherwise had without it. It's a small turning away toward the numbing and not the present."

(McKowen, 2020)

During that time, on more weekend mornings than I would like to count, I tried to piece together what had happened the night before. In hindsight, I recognize that I had started to have regular blackouts. It shocks me now to think that I kept drinking because I saw myself as high-functioning and successful. I was blind to what was actually happening to me.

MY TIPPING POINT

One morning, I woke up in my beautiful hotel room in downtown Vancouver where I was staying for an annual professional conference. I was on my bed, fully clothed. My Fitbit said I had not slept much. The last thing I remember was sitting in my hotel room with my colleagues, talking, laughing, and drinking wine. I had no memory of anyone leaving. So began the detective game to figure out the end of the night. Not my first blackout, but the first time it had happened so publicly.

As it turns out, a dear friend and colleague had bailed me out that night by shoosying folks from my hotel room with excuses of how tired I was. The next day, she was gracious, and I was full of shame.

Thus began my journey to sobriety. I found the author Annie Grace, listened to her 2018 audiobook, *This Naked Mind*, and quit drinking for 30 days. As I listened to her talk about what alcohol does to your brain, I started to realize I was not alone in this experience.

I first encountered my favourite author, Laura McKowen, through the *HOME Podcast*. The vulnerability and honesty I heard in those conversations was a relief. I also read author Allen Carr's work, and with his statement, "you will be so much happier sober," I realized how badly I wanted this.

I bought the audiobook *Drink* by Ann Dowsett Johnston – as with an audiobook, no-one can see what you are reading – and found my first role model in this older, well-educated woman who had travelled the same path toward sobriety.

I had many sober days and one-month stints, which helped me gain more clarity. But with a new job in school administration, I had increased responsibility and increased anxiety. I had no trust left in my own ability to moderate my drinking. How could a woman like me, educated and smart, not be able to handle alcohol? The shame of not recognizing the issue for

years, alongside the onset of menopause, disturbed my mental health in ways I could not have predicted.

It all culminated in this revelation:

- I could no longer drink safely.
- I could no longer enjoy alcohol.
- There is no moderation (third door) for me with alcohol.
- I had to give up the illusion of having control over alcohol.

REACHING SOBRIETY

With the COVID epidemic raging around us, I had my last drink of alcohol.

I had no idea that in many ways my journey was just starting. I thought giving up alcohol would be the hardest part, but living without the buffer of alcohol

and learning to be emotionally sober is an altogether different beast.

I had never moderated work well, so without wine as my nightly coping, I instead overworked. It wasn't even that the administration job was too stressful; it was that I could not separate myself from the stress of the job. With alcohol removed, I did not have the tools to manage the stress.

It felt too public to attend local in-person 12 step meetings, but as I had followed the work of Laura McKowen, I found an online sobriety support group and it became my lifeline. While friends and family may be supportive of our journey to get sober, you need people who truly understand the experience (McKowen, 2023). Community is key to attaining long term sobriety.

Daily online sobriety meetings – in the early morning and on the drive home from school – fed my soul



through the next year. My non-negotiables included morning writing, meeting with my favourite leader and sober coach, running or walking daily in the woods, and enjoying my favourite non-alcoholic beer and nightly teas. Has it been easy? No. However, it gets easier with time, and the joy of deep sleep and waking with a clear head never gets old.

LESSONS TO SHARE

What sneaks up on many of us is the shame of realizing that we do not have control over our drinking, and not knowing how to face it. I did not personally know any professionals in education who were questioning their drinking. Many keep it well hidden.

At a certain point, drinking takes up too much space in your head, and no longer allows you to live within your values. What I learned through this journey is that alcohol stopped me from acknowledging my feelings. I had trauma as a child and, as I grew up and encountered situations that were really stressful, really sad, or even when I felt joy, I needed to escape the feelings, and a drink helped.

Until it didn't.

I have built a toolkit of things that do help. Breathing deeply helps me to slow down and regulate my emotions when I feel them. I even taught my students box breathing at my weekly assemblies, as it is a tool we can all carry with us everywhere we go. It is critical to my healing to let myself really feel things in my body, knowing I can tolerate being uncomfortable as feelings will pass.

Exercise and daily online sobriety meetings empower me to listen and share with other people who are on this journey, and have allowed me to start to understand myself.

"Emotional sobriety is the work of a lifetime, with learning to have appropriate emotional reactions to things and just being comfortable in one's own skin."

(Valli, 2022)

THE RELATIONSHIP WITH ALCOHOL

Is your relationship with alcohol stopping you from building your best life?

Alcohol is social, it is marketed heavily, and it is normalized. You are often questioned when you don't say 'yes' to a drink.

"Directly and indirectly, what is transmitted to us and what we transmit to one another when it comes to alcohol is this. It's normal, it's the answer, but if for some reason you can't handle it, then it's not the answer and it's also not the problem. The problem is you."

(McKowen, 2023, p.23)

I never drank in the morning or during the day, and I did not miss one day of work in my 30-year career due to the effects of alcohol, so how could I see that I had a problem?

I did not realize at the time that I was using alcohol to cope with feelings and emotions, never mind that the thought of not drinking was unimaginable (Valli, 2022).

If you are questioning your relationship with alcohol, you are not alone.

In the prologue to Ann Dowsett Johnston's 2012 novel *Drink*, she poignantly describes alcohol as the stranger standing at the corner of the bar. I fell in love as a teenager with that stranger. Alcohol gave me courage. I could rely on it. It felt good and it worked, until it didn't. That stranger was magic in my younger years when it gave me a sense of belonging and made me feel better in my skin. Then, as time went on, I relied on that stranger like medicine, pouring wine after work before I even took my coat off. Then it became misery (Vargas, 2016). I was ashamed about what was happening. I didn't even look forward to drinking in the last few years, as I did not know where the night would end up. This, I now realize, is addiction.

There are excellent resources available. The Luckiest Club, a worldwide sobriety support group offers many online meetings a week for anyone interested in changing their relationship with alcohol. You can join for free to check it out and can remain anonymous for as long as you like. Alcoholic Anonymous (AA) also has 12 step meetings in communities all over the world.

You are not alone.

We are grateful to the BCPVPA member who chose to share her journey with Principi(ed) magazine. While she was willing to author the article under her name, the BCPVPA chose to provide anonymity to the member, in order to ensure her privacy and that of her district community. School districts make available many resources that can support those struggling with addiction to alcohol or drugs, and those who have decided to make a change in their lives through pursuing sobriety. BCPVPA members can contact the Director of Member Health and Well-Being to find out more, or visit the Member Health tile in the member portal, My BCPVPA, for links and resources.

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BCPVPA members can find a variety of resources in the Member Health tile in the member portal, My BCPVPA.

Additional resources include:



Government of BC



Government of Canada



Alcoholics Anonymous



**Information on Gambling,
Gaming and Technology Use**



**Canadian Centre on
Substance Use and
Addictions**



**SMART Recovery through
Vancouver Coastal Health**



**Cleveland Clinic:
Information on Sexual
Addictions**



**British Columbia Centre
on Substance Use**



**Canadian Centre for
Addictions:
Information on Video
Game Addictions**



**BC Mental Health and
Substance Use Services:
Provincial Specialized
Substance Use Programs
for Adults Referral**