

JOHN PENDAL: Coaching For People Who Feel Like Outsiders

Alcohol and Neurodivergence

I've been rethinking my relationship with alcohol this year.

It started in August at an event in Denmark, when I realised just how many of my anecdotes began: *"Actually, the most drunk I've ever been was in ..."*

They are great stories, and I don't mind telling them – but it made me wonder just how often I'd been drunk at events around the world.

I spent my twenties and thirties going to leather bars and clubs every weekend. I don't think I got drunk regularly back then, but I certainly used alcohol to help me relax when other people were around. Sometimes I used alcohol if the lights were too bright or the music too loud, to help me cope with sensory overload. Other times I drank because I was uncomfortable being in a room full of strangers.

In 2003 I won a competition in Chicago called *"International Mr Leather"* (<https://www.imrl.com/>) and as part of the prize I took a year off work and flew to events around Europe and North America full time for a year. I was in a different city every week (*sometimes a different city every day*) and crossed the Atlantic twice a month. I met thousands and thousands of people.

I definitely had a belief that I was more fun to meet if I'd been drinking. If I was sober, I was very aware that I was too serious, too intense, or not fun and relaxed enough for most people.

So I created an email address 'vodkajohn @ iml2003.com' (*no longer in use*) and had it printed on a t-shirt, which I wore with my leathers. I encouraged people to buy me cocktails when I was onstage.

I wanted to be the life and soul of the party, and I thought that more than a few drinks would help me achieve that.

All of this was great fun and a fantastic privilege. I'm not complaining at all. But I have been asking myself a question whenever I want a drink this year:

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"Are you drinking this because you're enjoying the drink, or because you're not enjoying something else?"

Sometimes the answer is *"yes, I really want the drink"* – and that's okay. Other times the answer has been *"I want the feel of a reward at the end of a long day. I'd like a big glass full of ice and tonic and a piece of fruit in it"* – and then I'll make a non-alcoholic drink that looks like a cocktail.

But sometimes the answer is *"I want a drink because I thought this was a quiet pub with my friends, and now a cabaret singer has started, and the room is full of people I don't know, and the next table is really loud and I can't process all the noise"* ... and now I'd rather say *"can we go somewhere quieter?"*

I think I've been using alcohol to mask being autistic, to cope with sensory overload, and help me appear relaxed and fun in places where I feel neither.

Chatting with clients I'm not the only person who does this. Many people mention behaviour they'd like to change, whether it's alcohol or other drugs, eating sugary snacks, or spending longer than they'd like playing video games.

I've found a useful place to start, instead of concentrating on the thing you think you'd like to cut down, is to ask:

"Are you doing this because you like it, or because you don't like something else?"

If the answer is that you are struggling with something else in your life, let's talk about that.

Before I knew I was autistic I didn't know it was possible to change your life to fit you – I always thought I was the one who had to change to fit in.

Life is much more rewarding now that I ask *"what is it that I want?"*, and sometimes it's just a quieter room with fewer people.

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