

# How people become mindful drinkers

Learning from Club Soda members' motivations and stories of changing their drinking

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## Introduction

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# Introduction

Club Soda is a mindful drinking movement. Our mission is to create a world where nobody feels out of place if they are not drinking alcohol.

With over 50,000 individual members, an essential part of our work is supporting people who want to change their drinking. There are many strands to this, including providing:

- Advice, information and signposting
- Short email courses
- Goal setting, tracking and measurement tools
- Real-world social events
- Peer-led online support communities
- The promotion of choice in the low and no alcohol drinks market
- Work with the licensed trade to improve their offer to people who are not drinking alcohol.

Over the past year, we have been developing a new support programme for people who want to become mindful drinkers, either by moderating or by becoming alcohol-free. Our aspiration is that this programme will build on the most effective elements of our work that support people to make lasting change. There will be two versions of the programme initially. One will be offered to members of the public. The other has been specifically designed to support people working in the hospitality industry - a group who are uniquely vulnerable to the impacts of problem drinking, and who are least able to find support that meets their unique needs.

In developing our new programme, we wanted to understand what was most impactful and effective in our work.

With the support of the Wellcome Trust, Bethnal Green Ventures, Big Society Capital and AB InBev, we commissioned research projects to understand more about Club Soda members' motivations for changing their drinking, their stories of change and what had helped them most.

## About this research report

This report combines the findings from two separate but related pieces of research:

- An analysis of people's motivation for changing their drinking that had been captured as they were commencing Club Soda's mindful drinking course.
- A collaborative online workshop encouraging people to reflect on their stories of changing their drinking.

## Overview of findings

People who want to change their drinking often describe what they want to achieve in terms of the mechanics of alcohol consumption - reducing the number of days they drink on, and keeping track of the number of drinks they consume.

But the analysis of people's motivations on joining Club Soda's mindful drinking course highlighted that their goals could be more multidimensional. Within that group, most people wanting to change their drinking could identify an objective and measurable goal, related to the management or reduction of alcohol consumption. But a significant proportion went further, identifying subjective goals which related to improving the quality of some aspect of their life, such as their health or emotional life.

Where individuals had goals related to improving their health, physical health and psychological wellbeing were seen as equally important. And of those who identified themselves as drinking to cope with emotions, almost half made a reference to anxiety and stress.

When Club Soda members reflected and looked back on their stories of changing their drinking, their focus shifted. While many may have started their journeys of change with objective consumption-related goals, when they looked back they consistently articulated their motivations for change more subjectively. Five key motivators for changing their drinking emerged from their reflections:

- Their use of alcohol to mask emotions and to deal with social anxiety
- The habitual nature of their alcohol consumption
- The physical and mental health impacts of drinking
- That their drinking was having an impact on their loved ones
- And a recognition that life might be better without or with less alcohol.

After recognising their need for change, the majority had been active information seekers, looking for support through online searches and use of social media. This had brought them to Club Soda. In reflecting on the changes they had made to their drinking, they identified three key elements of Club Soda's approach that had been particularly beneficial to them:

- Social support and non-judgement interaction with others
- Club Soda's work as a mindful drinking movement in normalising and promoting the availability of low and no alcohol drinks
- The provision of information and support including online courses

## How goals change

Taken together, these findings allow us to understand how the nature of people's goal setting may change over time. Almost everyone starting to change their drinking could articulate an objective and consumption-related goal. But in looking back at what they had achieved, they reimagined their intentions. The subjective benefits of changing their drinking - the improvements they felt in their

quality of life - had become more important than the practicalities of reducing or eliminating alcohol consumption.

It also appeared that people who had worked towards subjective goals from the beginning were more likely to have positive outcomes of their behaviour change in the long term. At some level this is unsurprising - an objective goal can only define *what* people want to change, while a subjective goal identifies *why* they want to change. When faced with the inevitable challenges that can come with trying to change a behaviour, focusing on the benefits of change can motivate people to keep going. And this borne out by the findings of this research. People who want to become mindful drinkers to improve the quality of their lives are more likely to be successful in following through on their intentions. They may even be happier day-to-day than those who focus solely on objective measures of alcohol consumption.

What might this mean in practice?

The importance of subjective goals has implications for the support Club Soda gives to people when they begin to change. Our new programme supports people to become mindful drinkers by helping them focus on living the life they imagine, and deciding what role they want alcohol to play in it.

But there are implications for other organisations working in this field. Public health messaging, for example, tends to focus on encouraging people to measure and reduce their alcohol consumption, rather than communicating the benefits of change. But perhaps we could collectively help people achieve long-term change if we helped them place their consumption-related goals in the context of their intentions to improve the quality of their lives.

Put more bluntly, if we want to help people change their drinking, perhaps we should encourage them to stop counting and start living.

# Where people begin: Understanding people's initial motivation to change their drinking

Jo Weir, Osca

Osca conducted research into the aspirations of people as they set out to change their drinking. Osca analysed and codified individuals' responses to a survey at the beginning of Club Soda's mindful drinking course. Osca's analysis explored the goals they identified for themselves and their underlying motivations.

## Methodology

Osca employed thematic analysis to codify 822 individual answers to a question posed at the beginning of Club Soda's mindful drinking course: "What are you hoping to get out of this programme?"

A detailed typology of goals was developing, falling into two broad categories:

- Objective goals related to the management or reduction of alcohol consumption
- Subjective goals related to improve quality of life.

In coding the individuals goals, both objective and subjective elements were identified in some cases.

## Goal types

Of the 822 responses, 98.5% (810) specified some kind of goal, and the majority of these goals (95%) related to behaviour change. A smaller proportion (17%) were explicitly outcome focused, and described a desired future state.

Almost all (99%) the 810 goals had an objective element, centred on alcohol consumption. These goals revolved around drinking itself, for example quantity, frequency and relationship with alcohol. Moderation was the most commonly identified consumption goal. Going alcohol-free, gaining control over drinking, drinking at a certain frequency and drinking to a certain quantity also represented a significant minority of consumption-related goals. Of those who specified a particular type of alcoholic drink, wine was identified as problematic by the greatest number of people, compared to beer or spirits.

Only 14% of goals also included a subjective element, relating to something other than alcohol, such as health or relationships. The most commonly specified health goals, other than making a general reference to health improvement, focused on enhancing fitness, losing weight, improving sleep and dealing better with anxiety and depression.

# Looking back: Exploring people's journeys of change

Dr Amy Redmond and Fiona Martin, Clever Together

The data underpinning this element of the research was gathered and analysed by Clever Together.

Clever Together hosted an online collaborative workshop to enable a more in-depth exploration of issues and views than could be achieved through traditional qualitative research. The online workshop was anonymous. This was particularly vital for participants engaging with this research as they were sharing potentially sensitive information about themselves and their drinking behaviour. This approach provided a safe platform for everyone involved to share their views, insights and ideas freely without risk of being identified.

## The mandate: asking key questions to generate real insight

In order to gather robust data which would allow exploration of the key objectives for this project, a mandate was developed and a series of questions were posed within the online workshop. Participants were asked to share their insights in relation to four key qualitative questions:

- About you and your drinking: "Tell us about you. How did you discover Club Soda in the first place? How has your drinking changed, if it has? Has it been consistent or have there been ups and downs? And what part has Club Soda played in that?"
- What works for you? "Thinking about all the different ways you've been in contact with Club Soda, what in particular works for you? Have there been any stand-out experiences or critical moments? What specifically has inspired or encouraged you to change? How has Club Soda helped you?"
- What doesn't work for you? "What could we do better? Is there anything we're doing that's holding you back? Or something you've done with us that didn't help? What do you want to see more or less of, or even what's missing? And why?"
- Anything else: "Is there anything else you want to tell us about your story, or about your experiences of Club Soda? Let us know!"

## Generating insight

The workshop was promoted via Club Soda's email newsletter and Facebook groups. Following the first round of promotion, it became clear that people who had been members for more than 2 years, or who had previously disengaged, were not well represented. Therefore, Club Soda staff personally invited members who had been involved with the organisation for some years, as well as emailing

individuals on the mailing list who appeared to be inactive. A webinar was also held to encourage people to take part in the online workshop.

## Gathering quantitative data

Upon initial login to the Club Soda online workshop, participants were asked to complete a 'gateway questionnaire', which gathered demographic information, largely through multiple response quantitative questions. Gathering both quantitative and qualitative data ensured that a robust mixed methods research approach could be employed.

The gateway questions gathered the following information:

- Age
- Sex
- Location
- Length of contact with Club Soda
- Club Soda tools engaged with to date
- Other tools and offers external to Club Soda
- Level of engagement with Club Soda

## Coding the data

The data was explored using an inductive thematic analysis approach.

Thematic analysis is a method for identifying, organizing, analysing and reporting patterns or rich themes within qualitative data. Thematic analysis allows researchers to explore how individuals make sense of their experiences and as such this was an appropriate methodology to employ to explore individuals' experiences of changing their alcohol consumption habits. Data analysis proceeded iteratively, seeking out insights that emerged from the data using an established step by step approach to thematic analysis. The following themes emerged from the qualitative data:

- Driving force for change
- Goal seeking behaviours
- Mood
- What has worked to help people achieve their goals
- Suggestions for improvement

These themes were analysed alongside the quantitative gateway data.

## Participants

In total, 280 people registered and joined the Club Soda conversation.

110 people actively joined the conversation (with 170 spectators), and together they shared 544 ideas, comments and votes.

## Participant demographics

Participants who joined the online workshop were predominantly female (81.8%). The most strongly represented age groups were 40-49 (37.9%) and 50-59 (31.4%).

Around one third (36.7%) of participants had been in contact with Club Soda for less than six months. Almost half (49.6%) had been in contact with Club Soda for between 6 months and 2 years, and were therefore likely to be familiar with Club Soda's tools and approach. The remainder had been in contact for longer periods of time.

The table below provides a breakdown of participant's length of contact with Club Soda by consumption goals.

**Length of contact with Club Soda by drinking behaviour**

	<3m	3-6m	6m-1y	1-2y	3y+	Grand Total
<b>Alcohol-free</b>	43	21	37	63	25	189
<b>Moderating</b>	20	11	16	15	11	73
<b>Want to change</b>	6	2	2	6	2	18
<b>Grand Total</b>	69	34	55	84	38	280

An exploration of length of contact in relation to consumption goals indicates that many participants, regardless of goal, had remained in contact with Club Soda over a significant period of time. This suggests that the services and tools offered by Club Soda are flexible enough to keep people engaged whatever their goal, and varied enough that people to remain useful for members over a prolonged period of time.

## The journey: What drives the desire to change drinking behaviours?

### Recognising a need for change: the main driving forces

As they looked back at their experiences, almost all respondents identified a key driving force which resulted in them recognising a need to change their drinking behaviour.

The reasoning which drove this initial desire for change appeared to fall into five broad themes:



- Recognition that alcohol related behaviour had a negative impact on loved ones, particularly children) (11% of participants)
- Recognition of habitual alcohol consumption (34%)
- Recognition of physical and mental health impact of alcohol consumption (25%)
- Recognition of use of alcohol to mask emotions and social anxiety (without positive effect) (16%)
- Recognition that life would be better without or with less alcohol (12%).

## Seeking help and advice

Once committed to the idea of changing drinking habits, respondents sought advice and came into contact with Club Soda. One of the gateway questions in the online workshop asked respondents how they first came across Club Soda. This data can broadly be divided into two categories:

- Active information seeking: i.e. online searches, print (book), social media (Instagram, YouTube)
- More passive acquisition of information: friend/family recommendation, TV, magazines and newspapers

Approximately 61% of people came across Club Soda by actively seeking information about alcohol consumption either through online searches, social media, books or via professional recommendations. Many of those who found Club Soda through Facebook were also likely to have been actively engaged in information seeking and as such information about Club Soda appeared in their Facebook feeds.

Around 22% of participants heard about Club Soda by chance, through TV interviews, newspaper or magazine articles or family/friend recommendations.

## The journey: Setting goals

The qualitative data indicated that respondents appeared to set different types of goals in relation to the changes that they wanted to make to their drinking habits, which could broadly be categorised as either:

- Subjective goals (life-changing goals, i.e. improved relationships, better physical/mental health etc)

*“Club Soda provided the opportunities and support to help me discover healthier aspects of myself, my personality, confidence and behaviours that had been hidden since the point at which alcohol first entered my life in my early teens.”*

- Objective goals (alcohol-centred, numerical or consumption goals)

*“I am currently on day 24 alcohol free. It is my aim to do 100 days and take it from there.”*

Overall, participants were much more likely to describe subjective goals which focused on making changes which would have a positive impact on their lives. 74% of qualitative data in relation to goals could be categorised as subjective. Just 26% of respondents had set predominantly objective numerical goals which focused on quitting for a period of time, or reducing the number of drinks consumed.

The table below explores the relationship between goal setting (objective vs. subjective) and the dominant driving force for change. This data indicates that when the recognition of habitual alcohol consumption is the main driving force for change, participants appeared to be more likely to set objective goals, that is, reducing consumption rates. Conversely, where the driving force for change was more emotionally charged, such as a recognition of impact on loved ones, or masking of social anxiety, people were more likely to set subjective goals with the aim of improving their lives in some way which was perceived as fundamentally important but not quantifiable. While the sample size is small, these results are worth considering as it is possible that understanding the main motivations for changing drinking behaviour, may be useful in understanding what tools and resources may be most helpful during people’s journeys towards setting and reaching their goals.

#### Goal setting vs. driving force for change

Driving force for change	Count of Responses			
	Objective (number of drinks/period of time)	%	Subjective (life changing)	%
Negative impact on loved ones (particularly children)	0	0%	8	16%
Recognition of habitual alcohol consumption	6	35%	12	24%
Recognition of physical and mental health impact of alcohol consumption	6	35%	16	33%
Recognition of use of alcohol to mask emotions and social anxiety	2	12%	8	16%
Recognition that life is better without/with less alcohol	3	17%	5	10%
<b>Total</b>	<b>17 (26%)</b>	<b>-</b>	<b>49 (74%)</b>	<b>-</b>

The table below considers the relationship between goal setting (objective vs. subjective) and current mood. Mood appears to be relatively similar across both goal types, although slightly more positive for those who have set subjective or life-changing goals. This suggests that it is worth considering whether working

with people to set more subjective goals in relation to changing their drinking behaviours would be beneficial at the early stages of their journey.

### Current mood by goal setting

Mood	Goals			
	Objective (number of days/period of time)		Subjective (life changing)	
Very positive	3	12%	7	13%
Positive	13	52%	29	54%
Neither	1	4%	5	9%
Negative	6	24%	11	20%
Very negative	2	8%	2	4%

### Alcohol free vs. moderation

The majority (68%) of respondents aimed to become alcohol free compared to 26% of respondents who were aiming for moderation.

The decision to either quit or moderate appears to be a decision based on the individual and their unique context. What is clear from the data is that having support in place to fit people’s goals, whatever those goals may be, is important. As such for people who aim to moderate, the mindful drinking movement has played a key role in helping them to work towards their goals, where previously there may not have been adequate support in place.

*“...I am looking to moderate after an adulthood of on and off binge drinking - I am 62 - and finally feel as though I am getting somewhere. I cannot describe the relief I feel.... Thank you, Club Soda.”*

*“...I am now 8months AF and I have now realised I cannot moderate. Club Soda is helping me to socialise while being sober and also made me realise that I am not the only person who cannot moderate.”*

### What works best in helping people achieve their goals?

Narratives within the qualitative data were thematically coded to understand what had worked best for people in helping them to work towards their drinking goals.

When considering participants’ narrative about ‘what has worked’ through a broader lens, it seems that the factors that help people to achieve their alcohol consumption goals, can be further laddered into three higher level themes:

- Social interaction and connection
- Normalising low alcohol/no alcohol
- Information

### What has worked best

	No.	%
<b>Social connection and interaction</b>		
Non-judgemental support of others	60	34.7%
Feeling of belonging/community	21	12.1%
Face to face interaction	17	9.8%
<b>Normalising low alcohol/no alcohol</b>		
Availability of AF drinks and socialising AF	16	9.2%
Adopting a more mindful approach to drinking	13	7.5%
<b>Information</b>		
Quit lit	20	11.6%
Online information	10	5.8%
Courses and webinars	16	9.2%
<b>Total</b>	<b>173</b>	<b>100%</b>

*Social interaction and connection* represent 57% of participant’s accounts of what has worked for them so far on their journeys towards achieving their drinking goals. Feeling connected to others who are on similar journeys, being able to share personal stories, seeking non-judgemental advice from others, and feeling part of a community, all seem to play a fundamental role in helping individuals to meet their alcohol consumption goals. There is a sense within many of these responses that as a result of feeling part of a community of support, they feel that they are *gaining* something – a sense of belonging, new social networks, a sense of achievement rather than shame, and an opportunity to make positive improvements to their lives. It seems therefore, that tools and services which aim to provide interactive support and collective belonging may have the most positive impact on people who want to change their drinking habits.

*“I’m nearly a year sober and my life could not be any more different. In terms of my relationship with Club Soda...There is no judgment, and everyone is so supportive of each other’s achievements and aspirations.”*

*“I try my best to attend any of the London social events. It’s so important to meet others IRL who are also living life AF... for me, it helps cement my sobriety just that little bit more.”*

*“The more I engaged with others in a similar boat and saw shared experiences that resonated, the faster the blinkers came off on my perception of myself and my own identity relative to the influence of alcohol. Gradually, I came to see drinking as a choice, rather than an integral part of my own identity. Club Soda provided the opportunities and support to help me discover healthier aspects of myself, my personality, confidence and behaviours that had been hidden since the point at which alcohol first entered my life in my early teens. They acknowledged with empathy that it might not be easy, but were there suggesting options and tactics to deal with any bumps in the road.”*

Normalizing low or no alcohol also appears to play a positive role in people’s ability to change their drinking behaviour. Some participants talk about initial concerns upon making a decision to change their alcohol consumption that they may struggle to explain their decision to friends, or feel uneasy at social events where they would usually have consumed alcohol, or that they may miss the taste or effect of alcohol. There are two factors associated with normalising low or no alcohol which seem to help to alleviate these issues or concerns:

- The availability of alcohol-free drinks appears to play a positive role in that it replicates the taste of alcohol and therefore, provides some of the positive feelings/senses associated with alcohol without consuming any. Some participants also reported feeling more comfortable socialising where alcohol free alternatives were available
- Several participants referenced the mindful drinking approach as a great tool in helping them to stay in control of their drinking.

*“The beer tastings gave me the experience of socialising in a dry environment and alternatives to order in pubs.”*

*“I lined up a good range of AF “adult drinks” to retrain my brain into not feeling deprived. Told friends and partner that I was stopping for the month, but my secret goal was to stop for good.”*

*“I’ve always drunk pints of real ale and have seen that as part of my identity, so that is something I need to address. I’ve found the availability of non-alcoholic beers a real help.”*

*“Before last NYE I looked into mindful drinking and found Club Soda. I wanted to cut down but in the end I did Dry Jan! So far in Feb I’ve cut back massively, employing tactics when I’m out to stay in control. I feel so much better in myself & have more energy.”*

Information represented 27% of qualitative responses about what had worked best in helping people to meet their drinking goals. Information seeking from various different sources appears to feature heavily early-on in most respondent’s journeys to change their drinking habits, and although not always described as the most important tool for change, it seems that the combination of quality, inspiring

information with other social or normalizing approaches may cumulatively provide the key to meeting goals.

*“The online fora and webinars showed me day in, day out, that there was commonality of experience and challenges for the majority who were wanting to make a change, regardless of their backgrounds or location.”*

*“I also love that there are introductions to lots of other people and books, blogs etc, so that different people can find inspiration from someone who suits them.”*

*“The build-up of quit lit, watching Ted Talks and the countless blogs all added to the weight of my endeavour when I finally made the move.”*

## Conclusions

It seems likely that the driving forces for change, the goals that people set, and the support and tools which work best, may be closely linked. One factor which appears to link these different stages of at least some participants' journeys appears to be 'people' – that the way in which our interactions with others can spark issues with alcohol, but that relationships and support from others can also be the crucial conduit for positive change.

What is also clear from this data is that everyone embarks on highly individual journeys, and as such one size does not fit all when it comes to what works best to help people meet their goals. Whether people are aiming to quit or moderate, or set objective or subjective goals, everyone needs flexible approaches and support which allows them ultimate control over their journey.

*“When I first realised I was drinking too much (I'd had a health scare) I was worried that I might have to quit drinking completely. I know that's the way that other people have gone, but I actually really like craft beer and I was sad at the idea that I might have had to give it up. So, the idea of drinking mindfully has been a revelation. Discovering some amazing 0% beers through the Mindful Drinking Festival, plus learning for myself that I enjoy beer more for the taste than for the experience of getting drunk, and realising I don't have to buy beer every time I go to the pub, have transformed my drinking. If you haven't done it, I'd really recommend Club Soda's mindful drinking course. Thanks guys!”*

These findings may reflect the journey that many people experience while attempting to change their drinking behaviours.

At the beginning, there is the recognition of a need to change, often sparked by the realisation of a profoundly negative relationship with alcohol and an understanding of the impact that it has on their own lives, and sometimes also the lives of those they love. While initially sad, or scary for some, that recognition is

the start of a journey, where, with the support of Club Soda and other resources, people seem to feel enlivened and motivated by a shared sense of direction and purpose.

The support of a community seems to play a key role, where there are no feelings of shame or judgement, but where instead, people can access flexible tools, support and advice to help them achieve goals - in ways which suits them as an individual. There is no indication in the data that people feel a sense of loss during their journey with Club Soda, such as a loss of social life. There are only stories of what has been gained - more control, a feeling of belonging, being part of a community and a new, better life.

## Contacts

For information about this report and how Club Soda is using this research to develop its support programmes for people who want to become mindful drinkers, contact Dru Jaeger at Club Soda ([dru@joinclubsoda.com](mailto:dru@joinclubsoda.com)).

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