

Perfect on the outside



Sarah Allen Benton

Recovering alcoholic Sarah Allen Benton was a successful high school student who had a habit of drinking to reward herself for all her hard work. She found that she liked it, and before too long she was struggling to give it up.

Sarah Allen Benton is a Licensed Mental Health Counselor at a college in Boston and author of Understanding the High Functioning Alcoholic. She recently talked by phone with Colonial Times managing editor Laurie Atwater about her research and her personal experiences.

You begin your chapter on Alcoholics in high school by saying that the Surgeon General reports 11 million underage drinkers nationally. 7.2 million are considered binge drinkers and 2 million are heavy drinkers. In Lexington our 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey reported that 43% of students drank in the past thirty days. So up front, I want to say that we are not dealing with a behavior that is not happening, although it is illegal.

Right, and I am approaching from the angle of the high functioning alcoholic (HFA) which is complicated. It's also a different way of seeing alcohol problems. Everyone has the stereotype of the kid that's dropping out and getting in trouble being the heavy drinker, but these kids are keeping it all together on the outside.

They had very high standards for themselves, and they have an ability to almost manipulate others' perceptions of them—it can be just hiding things that they know they're not allowed to do—but they feel *If I'm doing fine on the outside, my grades are okay and I'm in all kinds of extracurriculars—it doesn't matter that I drink on the weekends.* But that's what's

being fostered in teens—*Oh, you're doing well in school, oh, you're an athlete, you're a star, you've got this award here and this club there...*

All the externals seem to be okay.

Right. I wrote this book to increase awareness about what it means to have an alcohol problem or to be alcoholic, and that being successful on the outside and having an alcohol problem are not mutually exclusive. Just because you're getting straight A's and you're a great athlete doesn't rule you out. And I think that's the important piece for the [school] administrators.

People think if none of the flags are going off in terms of those outside appearances, then everything's fine. It's that image that everyone has about the person that has an alcohol problem or the alcoholic in high school—in college. No one wants to see their own child in that light, because they don't want to believe it.

People believe that to be an alcoholic you need to be a homeless person on the street, and they think that their child needs to be dropping out of school or getting in trouble to have a problem with alcohol. High functioning students are always going

to fall short of those criteria.

And they won't get help.

Exactly. And, I'm speaking as a person that slipped through the cracks. This was my life.

It's the message that if you do well in school then everything's okay that can also trickle over into the drinking. You think, 'I'm drinking, yeah, I may not be allowed to drink, but if I'm doing well in school, then I'm okay and if everything is looking good, then I don't have a problem.'

Who am I hurting?

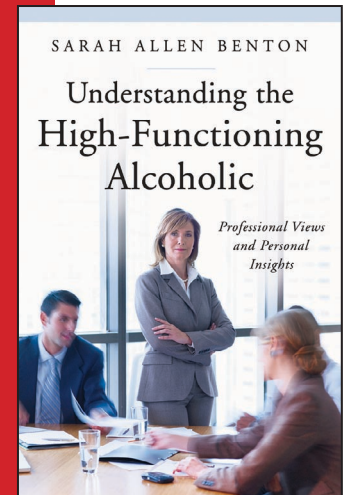
That's right. Who am I hurting? There's nothing wrong with what I'm doing. In more affluent areas, there's typically more emphasis on education. And that can sort of feed into the beginning stages of the high functioning alcoholic's rationale.

One of the quotes that I actually put in my book was a student stating, "We work so hard during the week, because of college pressure—it's the pressure to get into college—that by the weekends we're totally like, let the games begin."

Would you talk about academic pressure?

The achievement pressure can lead to this

"maladaptive perfectionism." Being a perfectionist can sound positive, but when it's maladaptive and it starts to become obsessive or a person feels like their self-esteem is dropping because they don't get a good grade—again, I say it over and over again with the high functioning folks; it's the work hard, play hard mentality.



For me personally it started at a young age. I was so focused and I would work so hard that to me it was my reward system. Not only to blow off steam—it was what I deserved—what I felt I deserved.

In high school you can't see the big picture. That

tunnel vision of high school—like, *My life is gone from here on out because I got a D on my chemistry exam* is catastrophizing. And, if it's emphasized in the family—the teen feels that they are letting their parents down it just sort of perpetuates that pressure.

Do kids see this same pattern in their parent's lives?

Well that's another piece that I talk about. Family culture can also influence drinking. Genetics account for 50%—according to the surgeon general—of the propensity for developing an alcohol problem. There's also that culture too—parents have worked hard, they're in high pressure jobs, and so they are saying things like, 'Oh, I need a drink', 'I'm so stressed'... It's giving the message that alcohol is the solution to stress, or alcohol is the reward.

What is their relationship to alcohol and what message that they're giving to their children about what role alcohol plays or should play in your life?

Also, when kids come from affluent homes they have a cushion financially in some ways, which all allows people to stay at a higher level of functioning if they have a drinking problem.

It can go on a long time before anyone catches on?

Right. So they're not going to necessarily end up on the street, but they can put themselves in dangerous situations. My drinking wasn't casual sitting in my bedroom with my friends. I mean, I was out in dangerous situations.

That culture within the friendship circle of laughing at drunken incidents is part of what

perpetuates it, because they put themselves in dangerous situations and then they sort of laugh it off.

There’s a perception around popularity and drinking.

Right. Having discussions with your child around *what does it mean to be popular* and putting it into perspective is important. As a counselor at a college I see students that weren’t so popular in high school are able to find their niche in college.

Does the age that a teen starts drinking predict whether they will have an ongoing problem?

According to the Surgeon General, if they start drinking before the age of 15, they have a 40% greater risk of developing alcoholism at some point in their life, regardless of their family history. I was 14, and most of the people that are sober that I speak with have started drinking around the age of 14. That’s kind of the magic number for a lot of the sober alcoholics.

I wanted to talk specifically about girls. Research is showing that girls are developing troubling binge drinking behaviors.

Females process alcohol differently because of the hormones particularly around menstruation. And females have different water content to their body. So, this whole ‘I want to drink like the boys’ mentality ends up getting females much more drunk. I think that it’s become normalized for females to be drinking heavily. They’ve closed that gender gap.

Girls use alcohol it as a disinhibitor in social situations.

For everybody. I never really felt like I went through that awkwardness in high school—alcohol sort of carried me through those awkward interactions with males—alcohol can be that buffer. If a girl has a predisposition to anxiety or depression and they have social anxiety, they start off self-medicating to make themselves feel more at ease.

Alcohol poisoning is such a danger.

When teens are binge drinking and they’re really prioritizing drinking, they’re just thinking about that drink and that high. They’re not processing all of the dangers.

I can look back and see it now. Part of that invincibility, it’s developmental—it’s brain development. I know there was research done that up until the age of 21 that teens don’t have that part of their brain that’s absorbing consequence; it’s not just being oblivious; their brain is just kind of not able to grasp it.

I was a very social person. I liked

to be in the center of everything. A lot of people that want to drink, they have a Teflon brain—the negatives just sort of slide off their consciousness as they choose to drink.

The challenge for schools and for parents is how to look for this—how to recognize when your teen has a real problem.

It’s finding a balance between having rules and having open conversations about alcohol—particularly before 15. If parents can just buckle down and get their kids to just pass over that threshold. They’re helping them for the future

I really think teaching balance is key. Part of being well-rounded is playing and having stress relief and learning healthy ways to relieve stress and integrating it into your life at an earlier age.

How often do you find that alcoholics also suffer from depression?

I don’t have a statistic, but quite often later on down the line a majority of alcoholics are dually diagnosed.

Do you find in your college practice that some students can turn it around?

Oh, definitely. I mean, the good news is that I’ve seen students taking responsibility for their drinking. I teach a harm reduction alcohol skills training program that’s come about because of the ineffectiveness of the scare tactics. Kind of meeting them where they’re at. I think it’s important. At the college level we’re teaching tips for, cutting back or watching your intake and eliminating the negative consequences of your drinking.

I don’t necessarily believe that you can scare people out of drinking. But not every story of alcoholism or not every story of problem-drinking is one of tragedy, or a dramatic story. Because my story wasn’t like that, I feel it can be even scarier for parents because they want to believe that only the scary stories are the ones that mean your child has a problem.

But it’s not necessarily the case. And particularly with the population I’m talking about—with the high functioning population.

It’s hard to confront your child when they’re doing everything so well!

Parents of successful teens have less concrete evidence that their child may have a problem, but that doesn’t mean they can’t have a conversation about what it means to be alcoholic.

SIGNS OF TROUBLE

The following list is excerpted from a chapter of Benton’s book entitled: *High Functioning Alcoholics in High School*.

Family members and friends of teenagers can watch for the following warning signs for potential alcohol problems in teens:

- ▶Change in peer group
- ▶Unwillingness to have friends meet their parents
- ▶Significant mood swings
- ▶Unwillingness to accept authority and rules (e.g., curfew)
- ▶Major disturbances in sleep and eating patterns.
- ▶Loss of interest and involvement in typical high school social activities .
- ▶An excessive need for money
- ▶Withdrawal from participation or interest in family life
- ▶Chewing gum or eating candy to mask alcohol on the breath
- ▶Repeated breaking of family rules after promises not to
- ▶Being secretive about social plans
- ▶Going to friends’ houses (and/or sleeping over) instead of inviting friends home
- ▶Smoking cigarettes
- ▶Defensive attitude when asked if they were drinking
- ▶Excessive preoccupation with “socializing”
- ▶Extreme fatigue and/or sleeping late (e.g., 1:00 or 2:00 P.M.) the day after going out at night with friends
- ▶Unexplained bruises
- ▶Random dents and scratches on the vehicle driven by the teenager

ALCOHOL POISONING

Underage drinking leads to an increased risk of alcohol poisoning, which may lead to death.

Alcohol poisoning has several signs:

- 1 An unconscious or semiconscious state
- 2 Breathing fewer than ten times per minute or irregular breathing
- 3 Cold, clammy, pale skin
- 4 Inability to be awakened by pinching, prodding, or shouting
- 5 Vomiting without waking up

Some high school drinkers experience a bout of alcohol poisoning and learn to limit their drinking. HFAs may be hospitalized for alcohol poisoning and, despite promising themselves or others that they will not make that mistake again, inevitably lose control and find themselves in the same situation multiple times. See page 44 for more information.

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Sarah Allen Benton is a Licensed Mental Health Counselor (LMHC) in the counseling center of a college in Boston, Massachusetts and is the co-leader of the Alcohol Skills Training Program directed towards helping problem drinkers. She is the author of Understanding the High-Functioning Alcoholic: Professional Views and Personal Insights and has been in recovery from alcoholism since February 2004.

In 2003, Sarah received a Master of Science in Counseling Psychology degree from Northeastern University in Boston. After graduation, she held several counselor positions at McLean Psychiatric Hospital (affiliated with Harvard Medical School and Massachusetts General Hospital) and is the Vice-President of the Obsessive-Compulsive Foundation of Greater Boston. In addition, she has been involved in psychologically-based research studies through McLean Hospital, Beth Israel Deaconess Medical Center, Northeastern University and the Boston University Center for Anxiety and Related Disorders.

Prior to Sarah’s counseling career, she earned a bachelor’s degree from the University of Colorado at Boulder’s School of Journalism and Mass Communication and produced segments in top markets including the Disney Channel in Burbank, California; CBS affiliate KCNC-TC in Denver, Colorado; and NBC affiliate, WHDH-TV in Boston. Her website is www.highfunctioningalcoholic.com.