

author of *Living All In: How to Show Up for the Life You Want*

“A compelling
invitation to sobriety
at its best and
most joyful.”
—**John Ortberg**

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the Sober Life You Want

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Dedication

For you and me.

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Note to the Reader

We can ignore even pleasure. But pain insists upon being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains: it is his megaphone to rouse a deaf world.¹

—C. S. LEWIS

SOME OF US RECOVER LOUDLY—IN HOPES OF preventing others from dying quietly. This book is me being loud. As much as I may want to, I cannot choose sobriety for you. That is your decision. But I can help you show up for the sober life you deserve, should you choose it.

I am a board-certified coach with a master's degree in counseling psychology and have worked with hundreds of peak-performing athletes, singers, dancers, writers, artists, soldiers, entrepreneurs, and small businesses to close the gap between where they are and where they want to be. While my academic expertise is not addiction specific, I am an expert at my own recovery from alcohol addiction

and am qualified to share my story with you. My sweet spot as a coach is in helping clients substitute limiting beliefs and unhelpful stories with certainty and narratives that serve them. The reason this is my inclination is that I had a lousy story in the past that narrated my self-worth, which led me to develop tools to

change my beliefs about myself, my worth, my power, and my recovery. Now I get to share my experience, tools, and coach training with you, so you too can show up for the life you want.

If you're offered promises for an easy way to sobriety, it is your cue to get curious and ask questions. I've followed several such claims unsuccessfully. No amount of academic research, science, money, fancy rehabs,

**People change when
the pain of being
the same becomes
greater than the
pain of changing**

medicine, hypnotherapy, psilocybin therapy, yoga, or quick-fix literature will free you of your habit if you have not first chosen that freedom for yourself and are certain *why* freedom is a must for you. Those things, while potential supplements to recovery, are not substitutions for your personal commitment to it.

People change when the pain of being the same becomes greater than the pain of changing. Successful sobriety stories include some level of suffering. That level, sometimes referred to as “hitting bottom,” is different for everyone. I’ve listened to thousands of recovery stories over the past seventeen years—no two have the identical circumstantial reasons to quit digging. The common denominator to people’s continuous success is that they reached a level of pain that made change a must. One person’s bottom may be the loss of their marriage, finances, legal rights, job, home, or freedom, while another person’s bottom is the feeling of sadness. On the flip side, I’ve listened to people tell of horror after horror happening to them and still not reaching the limit of their pain threshold. Yes, people do get sober because of circumstances (a person who goes to jail is forced to get clean), or to quell the fear of a loved one. The question to ask in that case is, is that reason enough to *stay* sober? Maybe, maybe not. I’ve learned that the pain, not the circumstance surrounding the pain, fuels sustainable change. Addiction will fight to take us out no matter what—until we decide we deserve to be free of it no matter what.

If you are stuck in an addictive snare and your soul is screaming *No more!*, you are ready to receive help. If you are looking for a temporary refuge from, or a healthy way

to moderate, your habit, there are books and programs available to you. But if you want to live all in, alcohol-free, and show up for the life you deserve, keep reading. Together we've got this!

I embraced and enjoyed thirteen-plus years of continuous sobriety and the life that came with it. I thought I chose sobriety for me, yet I came to learn that I chose it for my family and out of fear of what-ifs. I chose it to hold it together. So at age fifty-two, after becoming an empty nester with less to hold together and previous fears faded, I became drinking-curious. I love fun. What if I wasn't living my best life? What if there was even more fun and fulfillment to gain? I wondered, *Why can't I go for a life I love with an occasional drink? I must find out.*

I'm writing this book for anyone questioning whether to include or exclude a habit from their lives. Answering my own drinking-curious call after continuous freedom led me to uncover even more of myself, discover my reasons ("whys") I deserve to live free, and recover my sobriety. This is an *uncovery*, *discovery*, and *recovery* story.

As a coach, my goal is to help you uncover your blind spots, reveal your strengths, and partner with you to get unstuck. As such, in this book, I'll offer tools and exercises for you to process your own uncovering, discovery, and recovery. I want to help you tap into your own cleverness, curiosity, and resourcefulness to close the gap between where you are and where you want to be.

With love,
Chris

PART 1



Uncovery: What It Was Like

Chapter 1

Magic

*It is at the bottom where we find grace; for like water,
grace seeks the lowest place and there it pools up.*

—RICHARD ROHR

MY FIRST SIP OF ALCOHOL WAS MAGICAL. I WAS A freshman in high school, and my girlfriends and I loved being friends with upperclassmen who had driver's licenses and cars. We parked at a popular hangout spot in the foothills of northern California, creating our own party on the side of a dirt road on a spring night. It wasn't magical because of the company I was with or the significance of the celebration. It wasn't magical because of any milestone or coming of age or any enjoyment that television commercials and marketing romanticize as a reward for drinking alcohol with friends. Alcohol was magical because of the way it made me feel—from the first sip.

Although I remember the surrounding situation vaguely, I remember my feeling in detail. I can't tell you exactly which friends I was with, which upperclassmen drove, or what the cars looked, smelled, or felt like. But I can tell you the first sip of alcohol, from a beer can, hit my tongue and went straight to my brain, igniting a sensation that all was well, calm, and right in my world. I felt OK. As a high-achieving perfectionist who rarely felt centered or satisfied, I felt content. It was enchanting.

The mystique faded as fast as it arrived during that freshman year, and I learned to detest alcohol—for the feelings that showed up *after* the first sip. The hangovers, the memory loss of the previous nights, and the guilt and remorse that accompanied mornings after drinking stuck me in a shame spiral that my friends and later Scott, my husband, did not seem to experience or understand. Still, from age fourteen to thirty-seven, I continued to drink alcohol socially throughout high school, college, graduate school, being a newlywed, and

then as a new parent—never realizing that the euphoric first-sip feelings I experienced were not the same as other drinkers, or “normies,” around me were feeling. *Normie* is a name used in some recovery communities for people able to drink a bit of alcohol without it igniting an unquenchable obsession for more.

I was successful at school, relationships, and my career. I did not exhibit signs that screamed “problem drinker” to those around me, such as drinking daily or before 5 p.m., getting a DUI, being arrested, or missing work or important events. I didn’t drink during my pregnancies or while nursing. I lived for twenty-three years in my own conflicted head scheming ways I could quit alcohol forever—then rationalizing why it was no big deal to accomplish two things: satisfy my first-sip hit and blend into social norms. My body was addicted to a pattern of spiking dopamine, and my mind was addicted to the comfort of fitting in.

The rationalizing came easy to me. Placing unattainable standards on myself and then beating myself up for not reaching them came naturally. My pattern was to decide never, ever, *ever* to drink again; bump up against that first-sip craving; and then counsel myself to *chill out, take the sip, don’t be a perfectionist. You don’t have a problem with alcohol—otherwise people would tell you so. You have a problem with oversensitivity, overthinking, and being too hard on yourself. People have told you so. You’re going to ostracize yourself. Relax. Be normal and take the sip.* Thus, the cycle—of craving . . . sip . . . obsession for more sips . . . hangover . . . guilt . . . shame . . . remorse . . . never again—would continue swirling.

Guilt is thinking you did something wrong. Shame is thinking you're a bad person. I had both. Setting nearly impossible goals for myself set me up for believing I was wrong on the occasions I did not reach them—guilt. Linking my worth to my actions set me up for believing I was a bad person on the occasions I did not meet my high standards—shame. If you relate to this, know that you are worthy regardless of your actions, and there is nothing you can do to alter your worth.

One time, my college bestie got fed up with the out-loud part of my spin cycles and said to me one morning after I voiced how much I hated myself for drinking the night before, “You do this every time. It’s torture. Either stop the morning-after, negative self-talk or stop drinking!” So I stopped the negative self-talk—out loud at least.

My inner dialogue of self-bashing got louder and louder in time. Until finally, the pain of staying the same became greater than the pain of changing.

My search for a solution to quitting alcohol led me to a 3:00 a.m. prayer, which led to an Internet search, which led me to my first support meeting. That evening, I had drunk several glasses of red wine while completing three kids’ back-to-school paperwork, which in that season was quite overwhelming to me when added to the other important and menial tasks accompanying being a mom, wife, and good daughter. So, although terrified, at age thirty-seven, I walked into a 12-step meeting attempting to calm my “hangxiety.”

I knew no one in recovery. I thought an anonymous 12-step meeting was for drunks living under a bridge chugging from a paper bag. I was raised by teetotaling

parents whose parents and extended families also never drank alcohol. Attending a 12-step meeting had never crossed my mind. I had never been called out as having addictive behavior. I just knew deep in my soul that my relationship with alcohol wasn't serving me. I knew, and felt undoubtedly in my gut, it would be the end of me if I continued.

Yet when I asked my doctor about my drinking, he told me there was no problem or threat to my physical health. I asked a therapist about it and was told I had a tendency toward addiction but did not have an addiction, *so just be careful*. I asked my pastor about it and was directed to a Christian version of the 12-step program. I asked the Christian 12-step program leader about it and was told my main problem was being codependent. I asked Scott about it, and he said, "You just need a little coaching. Let's practice going out and drinking only half a martini with dinner."

This was the culture and community I lived in, in 2007. Well-meaning loved ones were giving the best advice they knew how to. Alcoholics Anonymous or rehab were the only well-known solutions to a questionable relationship with alcohol and, as far as I knew, were reserved for serious problem drinkers who had embarrassed themselves and others in public, done jail time, and lost everything—*not* churchgoing, classroom-helper moms like me. It didn't occur to me that my alcohol use was a real problem because, on the surface, I didn't fit the cultural stereotype of the moment. Also, the solution according to both AA or rehab was black and white. You either die from alcohol abuse or admit you have a disease called alcoholism and

survive by abstaining completely, attending meetings, and embracing sobriety as a grateful person in recovery. That sounded extreme and not for *someone like me*.

Today there are other options for people curious about cutting alcohol out of their lives. I'll list some in chapter 12 and why it's important to know whether you're wired to thrive with choices such as moderation, abstinence for health reasons, or abstinence for survival. For me, both moderation and abstaining from alcohol merely for wellness or dignity's sake was a green light giving me permission to partake for the "right" occasion or the "right" strength of a craving. The fact is, I am among those who must abstain for survival. I didn't understand this about myself until years later, so I am thankful that in 2007 my options, as far as I knew, were either you're a normie or you're not. I needed the all-or-nothing solution presented to me.

All the trying on my own to figure out how to moderate alcohol exhausted and almost killed me. I wanted fiercely to be a normie. I worked at it—made spreadsheets for my drinks, used baking tools to measure my intake, and created endless rules for my consumption, such as only beer and wine, only after 5:00 p.m., only on weekends, and more. I thought if I could measure my intake, I could control it.

I didn't want to be a drunk. I didn't want to be forced into recovery. I didn't want to get labeled an alcoholic. I didn't want to be a monster. I wanted to be a fun, controlled, dignified social drinker, like media and alcohol marketers portray. I believed then that being a teetotaler would make me the weirdo. The drinking culture was even

more persuasive than it is now, and I was a sucker for it. I believed that if I couldn't partake in drinking the way those around me could, I was weak-willed and something was wrong with me. I believed that since I couldn't sip a martini and then leave it on the bar the way a Bond girl could, I failed. So I gave being a classy drinker my all, never realizing that working tirelessly toward my goal contradicted my image of a failed drunk. I didn't see the driven achiever in all of it. I didn't notice that in every other area of my life discipline and willpower were not issues. I woke up at 5:00 every morning to run before the kids woke, kept a tidy home, was chief administrator of our family finances, and flossed after every meal. Yet I chose to focus on the one thing I couldn't control, then vilified myself for it. I only saw the drunk, so the narrative of my life before finding a sober solution became, *I am an undignified monster*. (I'll cover tools for separating truth from story in chapter 5.)

I wallowed in this narrative from shortly after that first sip of alcohol my freshman year in high school until age thirty-seven when I finally found a solution to the chaos. And for me, I was and am grateful that my choices were all or nothing—continue to be unsuccessful at attempts to moderate my alcohol intake or quit drinking altogether. I did not need more tips on how to drink with elegance or science-backed reasons for not drinking. I needed to know others like me—for whom drinking could kill them. I needed to know there were others like me—well-meaning achievers who've given the drinking culture their all and still cannot normalize alcohol. I needed to know there is nothing wrong or weak about me because of this, and I

am worthy even though I am unable to moderate alcohol consumption. I needed to change the monster narrative.

The morning of September 24, 2007, I walked into my first meeting, and it became day one of my sobriety. I didn't look back or question what people told me to do. I stumbled into the group as a last resort. Even though my rock bottom looked different than I thought it was supposed to, I had hit it. Out of options and ideas for how else to get help, I went to the group for what I considered to be serious drunks. I'm thankful God led me there because, to my relief, the room was filled with women I related to—and they had all their teeth. The only requirement for

being there was “a desire not to drink!” Immediately, I knew I'd found a solution that worked to a problem that wasn't working. I moved forward, grateful for the lifesaving program and information I discovered. The women I met that morning were the first

people to understand the unrest I felt in my soul. They got me and my relationship with alcohol. They articulately explained what I'd been searching to know. These fellow “alcoholic” strangers had walked in my shoes—on the same path the people closest to me throughout my entire life had not traveled. I felt home. Let me note here that I'll come back to the “alcoholic” label in the next chapter. I know it's a loaded one.

On my own, I thought I was letting God help me stop. With the group, I learned *how* to let God help me stop. The first day of my sobriety was the most pivotal

**You're valuable
and worthy exactly
where you are at.**

day of my search for contentment within my soul up to that point. I learned I wasn't giving something up; I was gaining a beginning to a story in which I'd uncover my authentic self and create the identity I wanted.

On that September day, in a meeting hall dense with the smell of burnt coffee and promise, a woman in the group said the words that sent decades of shame flying off my shoulders: "It is not your fault. You are alcoholic. It is like an allergy." What she said next made my freshly unburdened soul so light I felt like a snow-white apparition hovering above the meeting room's card table and folding chairs. "You never have to have another drink again." For me, a drink meant trying to control. I was tired and out of any more control. This was an unimaginable exhale.

I was ready to hear that I "never *have* to have another drink again." Some people enter recovery and hear, "I never *get* to have another drink again." Neither is right or wrong. You're valuable and worthy exactly where you are at. You could show up to recovery out of exhaustion for trying to quit on your own, like I did. Or you could show up because of a court order or a loved one's nudge out of fear for you. Quitting your thing may still feel like a chore instead of a relief, and that is what it is. Either way you are brave for reading this book and showing up instead of checking out.

For me, being told I was alcoholic and that it was like an allergy were freedom. I was off the hook. If I had this thing that had a name, I could find a solution to it. I immediately moved out of the problem and into the solution. This truth that I was an alcoholic did not make me want to grow even more active in my addiction. Because

the comradery and connection were so positive, I became a reassured alcoholic, active in recovery. It was a badge of inclusion connecting me with the first people I'd ever met on my same frequency.

I was finally free from the distraction of drinking, moderating, or not drinking alcohol. I was exhausted from fighting to control something that clearly controlled me.

Guilt Assessment

Here is an exercise to help you examine the rules you create for achieving your standards and the guilt or shame that may follow when you don't reach them.

- First, determine if your guilt is natural or harmful by stating the standard you believe you're missing. My standard was: I want to be and feel like a worthy person.
- Is this standard realistic and attainable? (Mine was.) What has to happen for you to accomplish that standard? What do you or others have to do, if anything? These are the rules you've set for yourself. These are the things that must happen for your standards to be met.
- My rule was: To be and feel worthy, I need to quit drinking. Since I didn't know how to quit drinking, I didn't feel worthy. Feeling worthy is a fine standard. The problem was in the rule I set for feeling worthy. In this case, the guilt I felt for not being able to quit was harmful, because feeling worthy depended on something that was outside of my ability to do on my own at that time, thus I made feeling worthy impossible.

- Write each of your own standards and rules for hitting them as bullet points. Take each rule and ask yourself, *Is this rule within my control to accomplish or does it depend on someone or something outside of my control to make it happen?*
- For me, the truth was, I was worthy before I learned how to quit drinking. Knowing this made it easier to partner with a supportive community that showed me a solution.
- If reaching your set standard depends on circumstances or people outside of your control, or if it depends on an unrealistic or unattainable effort on your part, then you are setting a nearly impossible standard. For example, if your standard is to feel happy, and your rule for feeling happy is that others include you and like you, then you have made happiness unlikely to achieve because you cannot control other people's opinions of you or your choices.
- If your rule for feeling happy is that you start your day with meditation and exercise, then you have set an attainable standard because it is within your ability to achieve. If you experience guilt for not exercising one day you can acknowledge it, show yourself grace, then use that guilt to fuel you to do even better going forward (natural guilt). If you

There is nothing you can do or think to negate your worth, and shame holds no power, right, or authority in your life.

feel guilt for not getting invited to a social event, you are stuck because being included is outside of your control (harmful guilt).

- Once you have set attainable standards, notice if you experience a guilty feeling. Next, stop and celebrate that you're aware of your feelings; then go through the previous list to see if you made an unreasonable rule for yourself. If so, ditch the guilt. It's human to feel guilt even when there are no grounds for it. However, it will not serve you to hang on to that type of guilt.
- If, however, the guilt assessment shows a true indication that you need to change and redirect your actions, do so and move on.
- Perhaps not meeting standards has moved beyond guilt to believing either consciously or subconsciously that you are a bad person. When beating yourself up shifts from holding yourself accountable to impossible standards into believing you are trash for not reaching them, shame is alive.

Shame is a liar. Regardless of how high or low you set your standards and whether or not you reach them, you are worthy and loved and whole. You are a priceless treasure whether you are addicted or sober, guilty or innocent, sick or healthy, stalled or growing, seeking or knowing. There is nothing you can do or think to negate your worth, and shame holds no power, right, or authority in your life.

Chapter 2

It's Not Your Fault

Even in recent years, I have seen too many people I loved struggle with addiction and die tragically from this epidemic. It is time for us to say goodbye to shame about addiction. We have to stop blaming and judging ourselves and the people around us ... That starts with sharing our stories.²

—LISA MARIE PRESLEY

THE MESSAGE THAT ADDICTIONS ARE A PHYSIOLOGICAL issue and not a moral issue, delivered by the sober angel of a woman at my first meeting, was gold for me. This truth replaced my shame with certainty and created a foundation of empowering beliefs that followed.

Maybe you picked up this book because you know logically you are worthy and loved, yet there is some behavior that leaves you feeling otherwise. We will explore your beliefs together, and I'll coach you through creating powerful narratives that serve you and your goals.

Perhaps the thing you know deep down you'd be better without isn't alcohol like mine was. We will name your "thing" in chapter 4 and work through steps to breaking your stronghold. I'll use my own examples with alcohol to share how you can get unstuck and move forward for yourself.

Look, addiction is hard for those of us who got caught in its trap. But it doesn't have to be. Nobody becomes addicted until they engage in a thing for the first time. If you, like me, did get caught in an addictive snare, know that it is not your fault. It is the fault of the addictive thing. The thing, not you, has the flaw. Granted, you are responsible for stopping the cycle, but not because it's your fault it started; rather, between you and the habit, you are the smarter one. You, along with your Creator and a supportive community, are capable of breaking free from whatever wants to keep you trapped. You'll do this with grit plus heaps of grace for yourself. I'll help you.

One magical thing about sharing our stories is, while we each have a different one, we hear parts of our

own stories in the stories of others, and those similarities remind us we are not alone. The more we share, the greater our reach to those on our frequency, thus the more souls we get to touch and be touched by. Part of my recovery story that I'll share in part 2 is that after thirteen-plus years of living free from the distraction of alcohol, I managed to forget what it was like to be tripped up—like the person who takes a multivitamin to feel better, then feels better and so decides they no longer need the vitamin. I invited alcohol back into my life and soon remembered that being tripped up sucks. I fiercely missed my sobriety, yet getting it back was not as simple as protecting it when I had it. Staying sober is way more fun than getting sober. Though getting sober a second time was hard, it was not as hard as not doing it would have been. *I chose my hard, and I'll help you choose yours.*

Today I understand that the gifts recovery gave me are my fuel to stay sober, not a sign I have outgrown the need for it. While I wouldn't recommend you go on the same field trip as me, I believe my drinking-curious experiment was not without purpose. I hope my experience, and lessons learned, will inspire and equip you to find understanding within a like-minded community and move into forward action.

I'm not here to determine right from wrong for you. I want to share my tools with you. When establishing the

We hear parts of our own stories in the stories of others, and those similarities remind us we are not alone.

patterns that move you toward, and keep you living, the life you want, there is no right versus wrong, only helpful versus unhelpful. I don't have answers for you; I have questions for you. Coaches are trained to question, not tell. I'll ask questions throughout this book to help you tap in to your cleverness. I'll share my story and help you get curious about yours.

When it comes to absorbing self-help, I'm a fan of "if it moves you toward what you want, keep it. If it doesn't, dump it." Use what works for you and allow others to use what works for them. Take in as much information as you desire, then keep what works. And if what works for you changes over time, evolve with those changes. Your past is not wrong. It launched you to the place you are now and your seasons yet to come.

The tricky thing about writing self-help is I'm keenly aware of how much I don't know yet. The awareness that what I know today will change tomorrow is enough to pause my writing if I let it. I want to share what's working *now*. Let's stay curious and grow together.

To determine what patterns to pick up and which to toss, ask yourself, *Is this behavior or thought moving me toward the life I want or not?* If not, ditch it. Now, I realize that's easier said than done. That's OK. We are going to move together through getting crystal clear on what you want, then creating a strategy to reach what you want. I'll provide tools to hang up your hang-ups with grit plus grace. Reading this book as you shift from a pattern that no longer serves you to one that does is an invigorating way to forge a fresh focus.

Framework for Sharing

A guideline for sharing one's story in a 12-step meeting is to share one's experience, strength, and hope by being honest about three things: What it was like, what happened, and what it is like now. In recovery this means what it was like when the speaker was active in their addiction, what happened to alert them there was a different way, and what it's like now that they are free.

This book uses a similar format to tell my story. What it was like for me to embrace sobriety, what happened to make me question the necessity of my alcohol-free lifestyle, and what it's like now that I've learned to appreciate recovery in a new and even brighter light. Most importantly, I share how my personal experience, coupled with my coach training, will help you gain physical and emotional sobriety from whatever is hindering you from living the life you want, and embrace the grace you deserve.

For years, I did not want to ingest any new information about sobriety. I did not want to expose my mind to new or different ways of thinking about drinking or not drinking—because my 12-step program was working for me. It stopped working when I became a coach and got curious enough to question my *why* for being sober (more on this in chapter 7). It was time for me to evolve with the new information I had learned. I needed to rewrite my *why*.

If you are already enjoying a program that works for you, keep going. Keep doing what is already working. If, however, you are in a curious space and questioning your relationship with a ritual, either for the first time or again

after stringing together years of continuous abstinence, this book will help guide your curiosity.

Whatever you decide works for you, be certain it involves community. Find a community of people who share your goals (I'll help you with this in chapter 12). The common denominator throughout my seventeen-year-long recovery journey thus far has been community. I believe that the role alcohol plays in society today makes it difficult to abstain from it on one's own. I also believe this will change in the future. Young adults today are already choosing not to drink alcohol, some before even trying it. A 2023 article in *Billboard* magazine quotes David Slutes, the entertainment director for the 325-capacity Club Congress in Tucson, Arizona, as saying, "We weren't sure why the numbers were like this. Then we did a deeper dive, and at every event aimed at a Gen Z crowd, we saw numbers that were very different. Gen Z'ers are just simply not drinking the same amount (as their predecessors)."³

There are several reasons not to imbibe poison, and society is beginning to recognize those reasons. If, however, you grew up in an indulgent culture, as I did, a support community will make shifting the patterns your brain has created around a ritual easier and more fun. Turning from what's toxic toward what's life-giving is entirely possible, and a supportive community invigorates movement toward the life you want.

A Word about Words

Now, a few words about words—especially the *A* word. Once we label ourselves, we often give ourselves an excuse to fall deeper into our addiction or fly above it. Labels can

serve us or hurt us. The “alcoholic” label, for example, can look like: *Oh well, I am an alcoholic, just like my parents were. I'm doomed to continue in this addictive trap. Or, I'm an alcoholic just like millions of others and thank God I'm not alone. I'm part of a community of alcoholics who have identified a problem to move into its solution together.* Change the label, change the narrative. If you have been caught in an addictive trap, give yourself loads of grace, and seek others who've been where you are to help you.

As humans we love labels. I've been surprised that some readers' favorite part of my first book, *Living All In: How to Show Up for the Life You Want*, was when I shared about being a highly sensitive person (HSP). People love being able to identify with something. However, we must be careful that what we identify as leads where we want to go, not where we want to move away from. Identifying with a label is different from making a label your identity.

Personally, I am not stunted by the alcoholic label. I never thought about the word in relation to myself before that first meeting, so it landed on me in an energetic and healing way. I understand this is not the case for every person. For me, it explained a part of myself I'd been struggling to understand for years. It was a relief to know my hang-up had a name. It moved my monster out of the dark and served me to know I am not alone. Being told in a meeting I am alcoholic was as easy as being told I am allergic to a certain food. It defined my severe reaction to

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a thing, took the shame off it, and provided a prescription for survival.

The “alcoholics” I surround myself with are thriving in long-term sobriety. In 12-step meetings, I identify as an alcoholic proudly because we alcoholics share a common language. When I say, “I’m Chris, an alcoholic,” others know it is a positive term that unites a room full of sober superstars doing life together.

Outside of 12-step meetings, I rarely use the alcoholic label because too many people associate it with being in an active addiction. It can conjure up a lushy boozehound image for some, and I don’t want to cause confusion or cause others to stumble. Also, I do not need to label myself in order not to drink. I’ve grown out of believing I’m the weirdo for not drinking and now believe it’s ridiculous to have to explain not ingesting a drug. I do not need to explain why I say no to cocaine or meth or tobacco, so why should I explain not drinking poison to anyone?

Once, I experimented in front of a mirror by saying this: “Hi, I’m Chris and I choose sobriety.” While true—I choose sobriety because it’s more fun, more exciting, and more life-giving for me than a life that includes alcohol—the label is not a safety seal. What happens if I decide not to choose sobriety one day? What happens if I decide to follow a craving and choose a drink under the illusion that the choice is simple? For me and others like me, one drink can be fatal. Since the choice is life or death—sobriety versus a leap of faith in my ability to control alcohol, a thing that has the power to control me—knowing I’m “alcoholic” frees me from having to willpower my way

into drinking or not drinking. Honoring the way I am lets me off the hook from having to choose.

Just because my first association with the word *alcoholic* was healing and positive doesn't mean yours was or is. It also doesn't mean that the *A* word will not change for me over time. It's important to label or not label yourself in line with what works best for you to thrive. Language is ever-evolving. Ask yourself what words move you forward, keep you stuck in a loop, or reroute you backward. When you're trying on words for yourself, notice how they make you feel, then keep what serves you and dump what doesn't.

For example, in early recovery I questioned the term *normie*. As a sober person I wanted to normalize the alcohol-free lifestyle, but the term seemed to do the opposite. However, *normal* means typical, standard, usual, or expected. It is the mainstream. I live in a world where alcohol use is mainstream, so someone who can partake in that lifestyle without consequences is standard—normal. I, on the other hand, have an abnormal response to alcohol and there are consequences when I drink it. So the term *normie* makes sense to me and helps me make sense of the differences between my response to alcohol and the average person's response to alcohol. Plus, being different is exciting to me. What matters is what makes sense to you. Think about how words land on you. Does a term help you make sense of your relationship to a habit, or does it confuse you?

Different labels, sober communities, and recovery options exist because unique people exist. There is not one church for all people, one way to grieve for all people,

or one therapist, coach, counselor, or mentor for all people. There is not one recovery language for all people. If there was, too many folks would be left without options for help. Debate over words such as *alcoholic*, *disease*, *normie*, *sobriety*, and *recovery* being right or wrong is not helpful. Writers volunteer to serve their audience by

sharing (most often uncomfortably) their experiences, knowing that content will not serve every person. I'm equipped to share my experience, coaching tools, and what works for me. I was addicted to alcohol, and I am not anymore. There are no guar-

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antees that I won't become addicted again, so I honor my recovery through writing, being of service to others, and staying close to my sober community. I don't mind what people label that. I care about my sobriety and yours. The tools in this book are meant to ignite your resourcefulness and creativity to get clear on what works and does not work for *you*, not ignite a debate over language.

Please focus on the similarities of our stories instead of the differences. If you want to gain freedom, focus on what works, not what hasn't worked in the past, and you'll be set to soar.