

I'm Sober & Afraid I'll Never Have A "Normal" Dating Life Again

It doesn't help that I'm attracted to "life of the party" ex-frat guys.

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Javier Díez/Stocksy

Q: I got sober five months ago, and I'm learning how to navigate dating as a 28-year-old single woman in sobriety. This is in New York City, where the dating and social culture has always been hard to manage, especially the older we get! I was in a serious relationship on and off for two and a half years (one and a half of them straight through and extremely serious where we lived together during quarantine) where there was a lot of love and friendship, but also differences and doubts when it came to our personalities and sex. I take full ownership of a lot of the issues and why it ended multiple times, a lot to do with fights and mistakes made while under the influence.

Since getting sober, it has been extremely difficult for me to get over my ex and not live in regret, especially since he has a new very serious girlfriend he has moved in with quickly. Will I ever get over him and be able to find that great love again? I truly believe I will now that I am becoming a great person, spending each day working on my hobbies and goals and, most importantly, identifying and working through my character defects as part of my AA program.

However, this brings me to my biggest question of all. How can I successfully date and be looked at as "normal" when I am in recovery and can never drink the way that most people look to do on first dates, special events, trips with their significant other, etc.? It also doesn't help that I am extremely picky, especially with looks, and also tend to go for the "life of the party" ex-frat guy type of look and vibe. I don't seem to be attracted to a more quiet, innocent type.

A: Firstly, congratulations on your sobriety! It is beyond commendable that you recognized the issues you were having around alcohol and took steps to make your life what you want. It's also fantastic that you're able to look back and see what parts of your past relationship may have been harmed by your own actions, whether drinking-related or not.

Before we go further, I want to be clear that I am not currently sober nor have I gone through AA, which (from what I know) is pretty prescriptive. If anything I say doesn't work or doesn't resonate with your recovery, ignore it. For professional insight, I reached out to [Anita Gadhia-Smith](#), a psychotherapist who specializes in addiction, recovery, and relationships. I also spoke with Sarah Levy, author of the memoir *Drinking Games*, who, like you, got sober at 28 while living in New York City.

"The general recommendation about when to start dating after getting sober is to wait one year. This is to avoid the highs and lows that can come with intense emotions and attractions, and sometimes can result in loss of focus on recovery or relapse," Gadhia-Smith says. However, she adds that "dating in the first year can work" if you put your recovery and sobriety "first above everything and everyone else." Levy took that approach, opting out of dating for a couple of months. "For me, the act of not drinking one day at a time was a big enough shift," she says.

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Another reason you might consider waiting? Successful relationships are often built on a foundation of shared values. Early in your recovery, “you may not even know what your own values are yet,” Gadhia-Smith says. “Take the time to get to know yourself better, and then you will be able to choose more wisely.” While it sounds like you’d like to date again now, consider what’s best for your well-being. You can always revisit your decision down the road.

When you start dating again, careful time management is key. “I always recommend scheduling your recovery activities first, and then schedule everything else around it to the greatest extent possible,” Gadhia-Smith says. This might look like figuring out which meetings you want to go to before agreeing to a certain date, or opting to meet in coffee shops instead of bars. “If I knew I was going on a first or second date at a bar, I would plan to go to a recovery meeting or call a sober girlfriend beforehand,” Levy says.

She got into the habit of giving her dates a heads-up pretty early on in their conversations over text. “I was casual about it. ‘Btw, I don’t drink! But always down to get a Diet Coke.’” There were plenty of benefits: “In a world of identical bar dates, switching it up can be fun,” Levy says. (She liked coffee, museums, movies, and walks. For non-alcoholic bars, she recommends Hekate on the Lower East Side and Getaway in Greenpoint.) “If someone had a strong reaction or tried to convince me that I could or should drink, I immediately knew that they would not be a good partner for me,” she says. On the flip side, she got plenty of positive responses, too. “You might be surprised by how many people are relieved to not ‘have’ to drink. I had a lot of men tell me they were also considering taking a break from drinking, and those dates were really fun!”

Your sobriety will make you stand out *in a good way* to the right people. “I think it was attractive to my now-husband that I was so confident and knew what I needed to do to take care of myself,” Levy says. “He knew that I had a Friday night meeting I loved to go to with my girlfriends, so Saturday nights were our date nights instead.” Ultimately, you have to find what works best for you. The right people will understand.

You seem to be working *very hard* at stamping out every single “bad” trait that you have and any “negative” impulse. It seems like you have understood sobriety as a journey not just about cutting an addictive substance out of your life, but about Becoming Good. I suspect that while you perhaps made harmful choices while drinking, you weren’t an evil or irredeemable person. I also want to remind you that sober people — even sober people who have never had a drink or who don’t have any issues with any substances — have negative personality traits and do harmful things. Substance use disorders certainly can act as an accelerant for parts of ourselves that we don’t like — and again, it’s *wonderful* that you have chosen sobriety. But sobriety cannot and will not solve all your problems. Instead, it will bring you to a place where *you* can decide what kind of person you want to be.

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And the person you become may be miles and miles and miles better than the person you were when you were drinking. But the person you become will not — and I can guarantee

this — be without flaws. And that's fine! It's great! You are still lovable. We all have flaws, no matter how many hobbies we do and how many friends we make and how much effort we put in with our grandparents. It's OK if you have trouble getting over an old relationship, feel desperately lonely, and worry that dating while sober might be awkward and uncomfortable.

At first, it probably will be! I am not sober now, but I was for most of college when everyone else around me drank. I remember very clearly how difficult dating and hooking up with people was when I was sober. It's hard if the other person is drinking and it's hard if they aren't. Most of us are incredibly unused to decoupling dating and drinking.

So what can you do? Well, first I highly recommend discussing this with your sponsor and with other people who are in AA. Ask them how they have navigated dating and relationships. It's not all going to apply for you, but hearing other people feel the same things you're feeling can help a lot. Ask them practical questions, too! What are good places to go on dates that don't involve alcohol? When do they tell people they're in recovery? How?

As for changing your "type," I don't think you need to do anything just yet other than unlearn your assumptions. Unfortunately for all of us, a lot of what we find hot is... inadvisable or annoying in reality. I mean, I find virtually every guy who drives a Jeep Wrangler mega-hot despite the fact that my version of outdoorsy is eating dinner on a rooftop. I have a suspicion that as you continue in your recovery, you will find people whose personalities and ideas of fun rely on alcohol less and less appealing. But I also think you can fantasize about a type of person and end up with someone totally different. People who are the life of the party so often are *not* like that when the party's over — they're exhausted or depressed or stressed just like the rest of us. Or they're *too* into being dazzling and they require tons of attention without reflecting much back. Aside from that, tons of sober people are gregarious and outgoing, and quiet doesn't mean boring.

I urge you to become curious about people beyond their looks and the roles you've assigned them in your head. Not because it will give you more options for dating but because they're people. It's not all about what you get out of an interaction, but you might find new friends in surprising places. Seek out people who are supportive and kind. In time, you might find that your "type" changes on its own.

Beyond "type," consider how your dates make you feel. "When I was drinking, I liked pretty much everyone and would accept the bare minimum," Levy recalls. After she got sober, she says, "I believed I was deserving of someone kind, who didn't play mind games, who I had a genuine connection with, and who made me laugh. The ex-frat guy can be a good guy — it just comes down to how he treats you."

My last bit of advice is this: learn to sit in awkwardness. It takes practice to not try to bend over backward to prevent even a moment of discomfort. Conversations may not flow like they seemed to when you were drinking. It may feel more difficult to open up about things. It may feel like everything is more vulnerable or intimate automatically. That's OK. Practice

being uncomfortable. It won't kill you! It won't. You can acknowledge it and you can ignore it, but just know that every time something doesn't go smoothly, you're getting practice in. You're getting better at both the slog and the gift of being present.