

QUITTING DRINKING:

Grant Foster,

50, Mission Bay

I started drinking with my mates when I was 14. I was a shy person, a bit shorter than average, and alcohol gave me courage. At 16, I threw myself into experimenting with drugs — I remember taking LSD at school and seeing the desks floating above my head.

When I was 24, I got sent to detox, then Hanmer Springs for eight weeks, as a condition of bail — I think it was for burglary. I stayed clean for nine months, but went back to Hanmer twice in the next year, trying to stop the dope.

After my third trip to Hanmer, I decided to clean up again. That's when I started my psychology degree — but I picked up drugs again at university. Eventually I ended up committing aggravated robbery and kidnapping, and in 1991 went to prison for two years.

Halfway through 1997, I picked up alcohol again after 13 years of not drinking at all. A girl I liked offered me a drink, and I took it. That night I got so drunk she wanted nothing to do with me. I got into a fight in a pub and I couldn't get out of my car after I'd driven it home, I was so drunk. That was when I conceded to my innermost self, "I'm an alcoholic." I admitted that I couldn't drink or take drugs any more, and I asked for help. The 1st of October 1997, the first day of my fourth Hanmer stay, that's my clean-time birthday.

When I left Hanmer, I went to recovery support groups every day, but now it's just two days a week. When that little voice pops up in my head — and it still does, saying, "A cold beer would be nice" — I just say, "Get thee behind me, Satan!" It doesn't happen very often now, but it's there, it's virulent, screaming, "I want you back!" There's only one drug I've got to stay away from. The first one.

Since 1999, I've worked fulltime at a number of clinics — Higher Ground, The Bridge, Waitemata Health — and now I'm clinical director at the Augustus Clinic in Parnell. It's a private outpatient treatment programme for people who want confidentiality and who want to stop drinking. That's what my passion and enthusiasm are for now.

When I was drinking I couldn't imagine life without it. Now I'm sober I can't imagine life with it. That's how much better life is.

AS TOLD TO AMY CAMERON

EXPERT ADVICE:

"The norm for our culture is to binge," says AUT addictions expert Dr Helen Warren. She says that in recent research, "about 58 per cent of people on their last drinking occasion had more than five standard drinks".

If you're worried about your alcohol intake, keep a drinking diary. "People have to understand how they're drinking," says Warren. "The Alcohol Advisory Council and World Health Organisation say for women it's no more than three to four standard drinks on any one occasion, and no more than 12 in a week. For men, it's no more than six to eight on one occasion and no more than 21 in a week."

If your diary looks worrying, then try the questionnaire at alcohol.org.nz or make an appointment at Community Alcohol and Drug Services (cads.org.nz). CADS will do a one-hour assessment, and you can make a decision from there.

Treatment programmes in New Zealand were historically based on the abstinence model but in the late 1980s the model changed to one of harm minimisation and risk reduction. (Warren says only one to two per cent of people succeeded in remaining abstinent.)

Most counsellors prefer their alcohol-dependent clients not to drink, but if they can't stop, they're encouraged to drink safely.

If you're not prepared to give up, try reducing the number of occasions you drink each week and, when you go out, make every second drink non-alcoholic.



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