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Navigating a destructive addiction with alcohol, and an obsession with running, all while hurdling lockdowns and new relationships, Freya has been through it all and come out the other side. This is her story.

Words: Freya Hughes

My

last years of drinking were like a death-march to a finish line. Energy sapped and feet dragging, everything inside was screaming at me to stop. My brain was scrambled, and my body broken.

I felt awful all the time. And I was hurting myself and those around me. Every day was stuck on repeat; the constant and unshakeable sinking feeling of crushing disappointment, and anxiety that was through the roof.

The upset in my partner's eyes was hard to see, as I came-to on yet another Saturday afternoon, having bailed on our Friday night plans to 'get on it' at after-work-drinks. The worry furrowed across my mum's face as I'd sneak drinks, start fights and refuse to take nights off the beers – breaking her heart time and again for the sake of the sesh.

The puffy, sallow mess looking back at me in the mirror: pallid and lifeless, crushing aches behind my eyes.

Cutting down was always followed by ramping back up. It was time to stop completely. »

ABOUT FREYA
Freya Hughes is a freelance writer and personal trainer based in Brighton. As a member of Brighton Phoenix Athletics Club, she's tackled distances from 5K to 50K. At the time of writing she's training up for an autumn of 10K races, and is hoping for a shiny new PB. Follow her on Instagram @freayah

» Since getting sober over five years ago, I've noticed there are a lot of people like me in the running community. People who are all-or-nothing in their hobbies and habits. It can be great for maintaining a healthy lifestyle – but pretty scary if you find yourself on the wrong path.

Running lets me channel my addictive nature into something where discomfort lives within a safety zone. It's allowed me to reach literal and figurative peaks I'd never imagined.

It's given me pain as well as an ability to sit with that pain, but it's also given me a shiny new addiction to pain. Most of all though, running has given me something everyone should be able to experience: self-belief.

Round peg, square hole

I was a happy kid. Rocking a low pony, shin pads, combat trousers and Arsenal shirts, I had a distinct look in the 1990s. The vibe was the real me, through and through.

Sadly, secondary school conformity is policed by angry teens and social expectations. The shin pads were binned and a new look emerged: hair down, tight jeans and tiny tees. I'd morphed into a regulation early-2000s tween.

The tomboy inside was buried. Football and basketball were quickly abandoned to avoid derogatory, homophobic labels.

At this point, I didn't know for sure that I was gay. But I knew that steering clear of sport would keep me safe from scrutiny.

Ironically, my idea of self-preservation came in the form of smoking rollies and downing bottles of wine (two for a fiver) in random fields, to a soundtrack of The Prodigy playing out loud from a tinny phone speaker.

As I forced myself into increasingly feminine clothes, my discomfort rose. Determined to be girly, I showed the world what I

thought it wanted to see. I leant into the party scene, hand-in-hand with my bestie: white wine.

When I say 'bestie', the truth is that wine sent me utterly loopy. Consequences be damned, feelings of loved ones ignored, down it went. Wine me up and watch me go.

The amount of fights with friends, acquaintances and strangers is anyone's guess, but it was almost a guaranteed feature of every night out.

Live, laugh, lager

University came in a wave of wildness. I became part of a tight group of friends in love with the

ses. We were all struggling with our own stuff and gave each other an escape. I shoved my identity down, others dealt with grief, depression and self-harm.

It was here that I started rubbing shoulders with out-and-proud LGBTQ+ people. They were a gorgeous bunch who showed me how happy authenticity can be. However, instead of exploring that side of myself, I stayed firmly on the outskirts and kept myself busy with nights out and parties, playing the role of your average

girl just out for a good time. It was three years of major excess, but nothing out of the ordinary.

It wasn't until I graduated that things took a marked turn. Back in my childhood bedroom, with no parties planned and no job to speak of, I was lost.

So off I went to the pub. Five pints and a slurry chat later, I'd secured myself a role as assistant manager at my local. I'll never know why the owners thought it was a good idea to give a 20-year-old child keys and alarm codes to a listed building full to the brim with booze. Alas, they did. And abuse it, I certainly did.

The party raged on as I avoided responsibility and reality. My parents' watchful eyes kept me pissed up and out of the house. Desperately trying to relive my uni days had me stumbling home

for the night against the morning rush of commuters.

Some people drank morning coffees. I had swift halves to stop the aches and spins. I lived for the night in a world made for daylight.

Around now, the issue of my own queerness was unignorable. The general manager at the pub was a man called Dre. Built like a skin-head bear, with a face like thunder 99% of the time, he'd mutter Polish expletives under his breath as he went about his day.

We'd often spend hours after closing just chatting about life. »



“It wasn’t until I graduated that things took a marked turn. Back in my childhood bedroom, with no parties planned and no job to speak of, I was lost. So off I went to the pub...”

» He was the calm to my frenetic storm. He was one of the very first people I came out to. As his hard face cracked into a softness I'd never seen before, he jumped up and gave me a hug. That acceptance changed my world. And it gave me the confidence to live my truth.

Dre died in October 2020. I've missed him so much since and will never forget the kindness he showed me.

Turning points

Christina and I met at a festival in July 2015. It was – cringe – love at first sight. For her, at least; I was blackout at the time (sorry). The first few years were a messy haze of parties and pints, but fortunately for me, Christina had a knack for holding down jobs, doing hobbies, and she even had the ability to say no.

Her good influence and ability to live like a normal adult did me wonders. It took a while for me to catch on that I needed to fend for myself and stay alive, but she was incredibly patient with me.

I'd try and drag her into pubs for any excuse: I'd had a haircut! We'd done a food shop! Celebrate with a pint! But she'd always be firm and not enable my addictive behaviour.

She helped me log my drinking to monitor how often and how much I was hitting it. She'd remind me of how much life there was to live and encourage me to go after it.

I definitely wouldn't be where I am today without her help. And by January 2017, I felt something change. I was sick and tired of being sick and tired. Pints no longer felt like the elixir of life. Instead, they were holding me back from really living.

One night after work, I pulled on some trackies and trainers, resolved to run. I went outside. I hesitated. It felt like all eyes were on me. Living on a main road didn't help. My cheeks flushed as I gave the commuters a show, trying to remember how to turn a walk into a run. Limbs gangling, I took flight down the road. Barely 200m in, my tar-filled lungs fought back with a hacking cough.

Coming of rage

In the coming months, I progressed from one gassed-out flail, all the way to

a 35-minute 5K. It was cold, dark and miserable and I did not like it. The nights I didn't run were still spent in the pub. The cosy lights and comfy seats, made all the better with that moreish first pint which inevitably turned into free-flowing rounds.

The pub promised a hazy glow of (perceived) safety and fun. But each morning-after would be worse and worse. Unshakeable headaches, a painfully solid bloated stomach and a disgusting stale booze stench that I couldn't shake. The ends were no longer justifying the means.

I death-marched my way through another three years of this before completely stopping drinking. My emotions were all over the shop, mostly feeling overwhelming rage at myself and the world.

I had numbed everything for the past 15 years. This culminated in constant anxiety and dread, and a pent-up fury that I didn't know what to do with. I wanted to hit something. Hard. All the time. I needed to find somewhere to channel it before I ended up in a cell.

A new Saturday style

By then, each weekend was the same: from thirsty Thursday party night, I'd wake up hungover (or still drunk), get back on it Friday lunchtime, have three pints in an hour, wile away the afternoon in a haze, then get back on those beers as soon as the clock struck four. Or when the boss wasn't looking.



“I was sick with horrific alcohol poisoning. It was the the most demonic hangover, one of the worst I’ve endured, but it led me to a resounding finality: the end was here”

Then I'd go off to the pub when I finished work. It sometimes lasted deep into the night, maybe an after party, then a sudden snap back to reality sometime after midday on Saturday with Christina looking annoyed/upset/furious/disappointed/all of the above.

However, much to my surprise, I soon discovered that Saturday mornings sans alcohol poisoning were – and are – actually a total vibe. I'd signed up to a local gym who promised loud music, flashing lights and some boxing bags to punch. My face was grey and my body heavy when I first looked around at ripped abs and fresh faces in matching sets, all smiling and joking. They were from another world – a place that scared but excited me. Some of them had just done a spin class and were about to do boxing next. Insanity.

Suddenly, a door swung open and energy sparked around me. It was go time. Within minutes, I was a mess of arms and anger – going toe to toe with a boxing bag while the music I used to get lashed to coursed through my body in a very different way. Electricity pulsed as the red-hot rage I was so used to feeling and pushing down finally came out.

I just about made it through the class, emerging from the dark studio in a repulsive mess of sweat and toxins. My life had changed forever.

This Saturday worship at the altar of controlled violence and dubstep allayed Friday night drinks. I poured myself into these classes, running more and avoiding the pub at all costs. Soon afterwards, I ran my first ever 10K and had two weeks off from drinking. I was on top of the world.

Stags and quarantines

Two weeks into being sober, I decided I was cured. Off I went to London for my brother's mini-stag, with the intent of showing off my newly toned physique and clean living to the world.

Unfortunately, things descended quickly. Beers, beers, beers, mini golf, shots, a curry (apparently, don't remember) and more beers. On my way back to Brighton, I secured the afters.

Having spent the best part of 17 hours on the wreck, I snapped back to brutal reality some time on International Women's Day 2020. I was sick with horrific alcohol poisoning. It was the the most demonic hangover, one of the worst I've endured, but it led me to a resounding finality: the end was here.

As rock bottoms go, mine wasn't world-ending or earth-shattering. »



» There was no jail cell, rehab or anything like it. Instead it was a rising tide of small, shameful moments. Hangovers to blackouts, ‘don’t you remember?’s and worried looks.

Like when my gorgeous mum showed me her meticulously marked calendar of which nights I’d gone out in a month when living with her. It was every night.

Like when I went to a drag show and remembered precisely nothing from the evening, finding out the next morning that my partner had had to get out of bed to come and rescue me from an unconscious stupor, alerted to my state by a – thankfully – kind stranger. Terrifying.

Dry days ahead

The end came, and with it a pink cloud of recovery bliss. I practically daydreamed my way into the lockdowns, carried along by a fascinating new feeling of ease: life is actually quite fun without crushing hangovers.

I had been living in a push-pull of trying to escape the after-work drinks, and being sucked back into old habits. So when we were told to pack up our desks and head home for at least the rest of

the week (which obviously went on to be months), I was just relieved to avoid another Friday-night office party.

My previous scattering of 5K runs gave way to longer and more regular runs. Sober mornings became viable options for runs, the promenade lit up by the early summer – practically singing with beauty as the sea shimmered at a seafront full of runners.

I kept myself isolated in a cocoon of endorphins, smashing out one, two, sometimes three online workouts a day, plus running and wobbling through the odd yoga session.

For me, the lockdowns provided the ultimate reset. I’m not sure if I’d have been able to do this without them.

It wasn’t long, though, until my pink cloud floated away in the breeze. I was left bare and exposed to at least a decade of suppressed emotions and identity crises.

A chat with a good friend who had gone through addiction counselling told me that you apparently pause at the emotional age you were when you first started abusing substances. I must say that tracked when I looked back at my own experiences.

Working through things

Looking back through my Strava, I can see where that pink cloud bubble popped. My training became more crazed – each day, I threw myself into a new challenge. Another 10K, then 13K, why not 18K, then try running every day.

I did a half, then I did it again, then flew up to 25K, 27K, 32K, then a week or two after that I went out one morning and ran a marathon.

The next stage of my sobriety felt like a punishment: it felt like a constant hangover, sluggish and unrelenting. Fed up with the injustice of it, I took it out on the nearest hill.

The dark clouds in my brain cleared after a couple of kms, so I decided to go and visit my parents and sister over in the next town. I calculated that I’d be around a half-marathon distance by the time I got there, so called ahead and asked them to get me a pint of water ready. Top-tier marathon fuelling, that.

When I arrived, I told them I wasn’t stopping long, as I needed to run back to round up to a marathon. My sister looked at me as if I’d finally lost it completely and my mum dropped her favourite line: ‘don’t you think you’re overdoing it a bit?’

Yes, my legs felt like lead wading through treacle. Yes, I was unable to move for a day (maybe two) after. Yes, there were times when I felt like stopping. But I felt like me again. The happy kid version of me.

That run reminded me of something I’d not been sure of for a while: I realised it was that I could rely on myself. I finally believed in myself again.

There is no finish line

Running is my second longest addiction. And in a few years, it’ll be my longest standing.

It’s been with me for the last five years of sobriety, providing a safe space to be myself without my

security bottle. Boxing has given way to parkrun, and on-a-whim marathons have been swapped with chip-timed races and PBs.

That’s not to say it’s all been sunshine and rainbows. During the last few years at a job I dreaded each day, my running took a huge hit as my mental health tanked. A combination of a toxic culture, plus doing a job that I’d completely outgrown made me feel like I was standing on shaky ground.

This uncertainty led to my first wobbles. I’d get huge rushes of temptation out of nowhere telling me to go and drink. This was about three years into my sobriety, which felt extremely disarming. It happened a few times over a six-month period. Each time it stripped me bare, reducing me to tears.

Going freelance has allowed me to find firmer ground and I’ve added personal training as a string to my bow, which is one of the most rewarding things I’ve done in my life.

They say that the opposite of addiction is connection and I truly believe in that. Being with people on their fitness journeys has inspired me. And with a more flexible lifestyle, I’ve leant into my running club, volunteering and organising runs where I can.

Transformative times

In the five years since I’ve had a drink, I’ve made a life for myself I’d never have imagined possible. The years that have led up to today have shown me that life evolves. I’ll always put a lot of time and effort into protecting my sobriety, and resolve to never go back to the lifestyle I used to live.

Of course, I don’t know what’s around the corner. But moving forward is non-negotiable. Just like with running, sometimes it’ll hurt, and sometimes I’ll fly. Some days will be gloomy, and others will sing with sunlight. All I have to remember to do is put one foot in front of the other. 🏃

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