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Why I stood by my alcoholic husband'

Debbie Perriss, 43, watched her partner Colin, 45, lose his business, their home, and the trust of their three children. Here she reveals what it's really like to live with an alcoholic and how drinking cost him everything – except her love



Debbie with her partner Colin

It's easy to imagine an alcoholic as a vagrant on a park bench with a bottle of spirits in a brown paper bag. It isn't so easy to imagine that drunk to be your husband, swigging vodka from a crystal glass in your five-bedroom house.

But this was the grim reality I faced when Colin began his descent into alcoholism seven years ago. He morphed from successful businessman and father-of-three into a broken man on his knees, and went from being my protector to my responsibility.

I'd never been interested in alcohol and, when I met Colin at 17, he felt much the same. We drank socially but not every night, and even less after we married and had our first child, Steven, in 1990.

Colin's drinking increased so slowly that I barely noticed. His management consultancy business was going well, and as I didn't work, he insisted on shouldering all of our financial responsibilities.

Providing for his family meant everything to him, which sometimes meant any pressures he felt were internalised rather than shared. After a stressful day, he'd prefer to drink a vodka and tonic to confiding in me.

By 2001 we'd had two more children – Jon, now 13, and Susan, now ten – and bought a five-bedroom house in Norfolk with a 14-acre garden and an annex for Colin's mother, Brenda. Our mortgage payments increased, but business was booming, so we could afford it.

Within weeks of moving, Colin started drinking every evening – usually three beers or vodkas. It was more than before, yet not serious enough to spark any real worries, and I told myself he was stressed after the move. As soon as he took that first sip, he'd visibly relax.

He started inviting the new neighbours round for drinks. They thought him the perfect host – amiable and liberal with the measures – but I couldn't ignore my doubts; was inviting people round a way of making his own drinking acceptable?

It felt like we were running an open house, with people coming over most nights. I hardly drank and went to bed early, while he'd stumble up drunk in the early hours. I'd lie there fuming but wrote it off as Colin trying to make new friends, and I never stayed annoyed for long.

While Colin was a happy drunk, he was miserable with a hangover. At weekends he'd get up at 11am and just sit staring into space. When I asked if something was wrong he'd say, 'Everything's fine. Nothing for you to worry about.' But I couldn't kick the feeling that there was something more to all this.

Finally, after forcing it out of him, he sobbed into my arms and admitted losing a major work contract a couple of months earlier. Colin, however, didn't link his increased drinking with work stress and denied having a problem.

The balance of our relationship changed. I became the one in charge, the one shouldering the worries. I got a part-time job which at least meant the kids were fed and clothed. But Colin was still inviting people round, and when I went shopping, he'd give me a list of alcohol to buy – four bottles of wine, beer and two bottles of premium spirits.

The money he gave me barely covered the cost of drinks, let alone food. We'd have rows but it was useless. I knew that if I didn't buy it, he'd get it himself. I kept explaining away his behavior as financial stress, and thought that when work picked up, he'd cut back.

But he didn't. Colin was drinking earlier – and now on his own. Because he worked from home, he'd knock off at 3pm and have a vodka and tonic. I remember him asking if 11am was too early for a drink. 'Why don't you pour vodka on your cornflakes?' I replied in disgust.

Over the next few years he put on two stone, and the whites of his eyes went creamy yellow. His relationship with the children suffered and he missed countless school plays.

It affected Steven the most because, at 13, he needed father/son time. He'd say, 'Is Dad drunk again?' and I'd reply, 'Yes, but I'm going to sort it out.'



Colin and Debbie with their three children, from left: Jon, 13, Susan, ten, and Steven, 18

I tried to reason with Colin, telling him to think of his health, the kids, the business, our relationship. But he denied having a problem. The constant struggle made me very tired, but I wasn't going to give up. What sort of a wife would I be if I left him at the first hurdle?

He was cold and distant during the day, but jolly when he'd had a drink. He was usually too far gone to be intimate in bed, plus I wasn't interested with him in that state. But I didn't want to leave him; I loved him, knew he was a good man and I'd miss him. I'd shout at him but I never took the glass out of his hand. I wasn't prepared to humiliate him like that; if Colin was to stop, he had to do it.

I'll never know where I found that inner strength. I found solace in Brenda's annex – it was the only place I cried. Colin talked to her too, and she was incredibly supportive. I didn't tell anyone else – I still couldn't admit to myself that he was a full-blown alcoholic despite the fact that he was drinking two bottles of wine or almost a litre of vodka a day, costing £100 a week.

It was 2005 before we finally faced facts. Because Colin was often drunk or hungover, he lost two more contracts and fell behind on the mortgage repayments.

It would have been easy to feel resentful, but my Blitz-like mentality meant keeping things on an even keel. Plus, worryingly, Colin was talking about suicide. 'You and the kids will be better off without me,' he said. 'You're talking rubbish,' I cried. 'The family would fall apart without you.'

The bleak morning of this conversation, when Colin went to his darkest place, marked the beginning of his recovery. It was the first time he admitted being an alcoholic. From that point, he didn't touch a drop.

He still got cravings, and was often depressed because he had to face reality, instead of hiding behind a bottle. Three months later, the bank took us to court to begin repossession proceedings. Colin was terrified, but he didn't touch a drop.

We managed to sell the house before it was repossessed, but the £300,000 from the sale only just covered our debts so we were left with nothing. We moved into rented accommodation, and couldn't even afford presents for the kids' birthdays.

Colin carried on doing what consultancy work he could, and I helped by doing telesales from home. He used new hobbies, such as cycling, cooking and painting with the kids, to keep him away from temptation and to make up for lost time.

What really helped were the children. Susan said, 'We didn't like you when you were drunk. You're much nicer now, Daddy.' She was right. He was becoming the caring, gentle man I married, and his new healthy lifestyle meant he lost the weight he'd put on.

We still don't have a mortgage, and it will be hard to get one because of our dealings in court, but we're happy in the four-bedroom home we're renting. Living without drink slowly became easier for Colin, and I helped by not having any either. I felt like I had to watch him when he first gave up, but over the past three years I've learnt to trust him again. All that he's been through inspired him to share the message that an addiction can be beaten.

In July, after months of research, Colin launched his own business, eNP4, where people with drink problems can be mentored and educated on the pitfalls of alcohol. I'm sharing my experience with partners of alcoholics, because they need support, too.

Hearing about an experience first-hand is a powerful tool – Steven, now 18, saw what alcohol did to his dad, and he doesn't drink at all. Living with an alcoholic has a profound effect on every member of the family, and I'm grateful we dug deep enough to find the strength to keep ours together.

For more information about eNP4 visit enp4.co.uk