**I’m Sober And My Partner Is Not. Here’s How We Make It Work.**

*"He’s respectful of my life choices, so I’m respectful of his."*

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Adam Banks was an airline pilot who turned to alcohol to cope with the trauma of having been in the skies on Sept. 11, 2001. His use escalated over the years, and by his early 30s, he realized that it was time for him to quit — but it took a while before he understood that this would require leaving his partner.

“He wasn’t supportive at all and kept pulling me back into drug and alcohol use. So it wasn’t until I got the strength to free myself of that relationship that I actually got sober,” Banks told HuffPost.

Now 49 years old, Banks has successfully maintained his sobriety for 16 years. During these years, he adopted two children, now 12 and 17, and made a career as a professional interventionist, helping families get struggling relatives into rehab.

He’s also forged a healthy romantic relationship. His current partner, Tony, isn’t sober. Tony’s alcohol use is distinct, however, from Banks’ own former use, and that of his former partner.

“[Tony] drinks the occasional glass of wine,” Banks said, and doesn’t exhibit any signs of an alcohol problem.

His sobriety, he said, made the relationship with Tony possible: “[He] came to me because of my sobriety. If I was heavily drinking, he would have never dated me.”

There is no one “correct” way to do relationships in sobriety. Some people stay with the person they were with before getting sober, and that relationship evolves to accommodate a new way of living. Others meet new partners after having gotten sober, often people who wouldn’t have been a part of their lives if they were still drinking.

Some sober people find a partner in another sober person, but it isn’t the rule. There are many former drinkers in sober-discordant relationships, where one person no longer drinks but their partner does.

How each couple handles their drinking partner’s alcohol use is unique to their relationship, but successful partnerships share several key characteristics.

### **The drinking partner has a healthy relationship with alcohol, and its role in their life is insignificant.**

Sober partners speak, sometimes with dismay, about the easygoing, take-it-or-leave-it attitude their partners have toward alcohol, at the same time recognizing that if alcohol was a greater pull for their partner, it would make remaining both sober and in the partnership difficult.

“There’s been times where he’s drank too much and annoyed me,” Banks said of Tony. “But it happens so, so rarely that it tends to be more comical than annoying to me.”

Stewart Lee, 41, who has been sober for 10 years and written [a memoir](https://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/1739097076?tag=thehuffingtop-20&ascsubtag=64ba872de4b0dcb4cab8cd48%2C-1%2C-1%2Cd%2C0%2C0%2Chp-fil-am%3D0%2C1172%3A2%2C0%2C0%2C0) about his recovery journey, has been in a relationship for about a year with his partner, Rosie Leigh, 32. She described her own relationship to alcohol: “I have very good control over the amount I drink. I’ll have a glass of wine — I’ll open a bottle, have a glass and then the next day just chuck the rest away because I don’t want it. I don’t drink to get drunk.”

“That feeling when you’re sort of out of control — I don’t like that. But I do like to have a drink,” she told HuffPost.

Lee jokingly called this mindset “weird” to him, but the unimportance that alcohol has in Leigh’s life, and her willingness to take it or leave it, is one factor that helps their relationship work.

Leigh says that being in a relationship with Lee leads her to drink less, and she sees that as a positive overall. “If he did drink, I think potentially we would be drinking a lot more. I would be drinking a lot more, because, you know, I’m easily encouraged.” Lee’s influence has led to different shared activities. “Instead we get up at like half past 5 in the morning to go to the gym,” she said.

Vanessa Royle, 31, quit drinking during the pandemic, in May of 2020. She initially cut out alcohol alongside caffeine and sugar, but after reintroducing the latter two, Royle came to the conclusion that she should leave alcohol behind for good.

“I kind of realized in my time of reflection, [alcohol] had caused a lot of issues in my life. It was something I wasn’t proud of. And I really viewed this moment of COVID as a time where I could quietly quit,” Royle told HuffPost.

Over the past several years of being alcohol-free, Royle has founded a [non-alcoholic beverage business](https://drinktilden.com/pages/our-story) and married her partner.

“I think my sobriety is a huge reason why I’ve been successful in my business. I think it’s why my marriage has been successful. I think it’s why I have great friends now. So I’m really proud of it,” she said.

While Royle was with her husband before she stopped drinking, she now sees how much her desire to drink fueled their use. “When we first started dating, he drank a lot — or I thought he drank a lot. He definitely drank more because I drank more,” said Royle.

“I stopped drinking and quickly realized I was the problem drinker in the relationship,” she said. Her partner drank significantly less when she abstained, and has easily adjusted his own drinking to Royle’s sobriety.

“He can go out, have a drink or two, and it just adds to his evening, whereas I was definitely someone who saw alcohol as the main event,” she said.

### **There is open and honest communication about feelings around alcohol.**

While sober partners don’t want to control their partner’s drinking, or force them to adhere to an alcohol-free lifestyle, there is an expectation in these relationships that if the sober partner feels uncomfortable — for example, if they want to skip a certain event, or leave a party early — that the drinking partner will be understanding and supportive.

Royle says that while her husband doesn’t need to ask her for permission each time before he orders a drink when they’re out together, there’s a shared understanding that he won’t drink to excess.

“Some situations he’ll say, ‘Hey, do you mind?’” said Royle, but her feeling is, “You don’t have to ask me. It’s okay.”

When it comes to going out with his friends or colleagues, Royle said, “We just communicate a lot. He’ll say, ‘Hey, I’m gonna go out. I’m gonna do this. This is where I’m going. I might call you slightly tipsy later, you don’t have to pick up.’”

“He’s pretty respectful and considerate of where I’m at,” she continued. “He’s respectful of my life choices, so I’m respectful of his.”

Mary Stephens, a 57-year-old Californian who has been sober for 12 years, remained in the same marriage both before and after she quit drinking. Her alcohol use had begun to cause tension in her marriage, and her husband, Dave, “was so grateful and so supportive” of her sobriety, she told HuffPost.

When she was newly sober, “we didn’t drink in the house [and] when we would go out he would ask me if it was okay,” she remembered, although she admits that she felt pressured to say his having a drink didn’t bother her even when, in truth, it did.

These days, it’s easier for her to pass when others are drinking. “We were at a party recently, and this guy came out with a tray of shots and was like, ‘Everybody take a shot!’ and I’m like, ‘I’m out,’” she said.

“Dave stayed, and I went home, which is a complete role reversal for us, but I was happy — happy for him to have fun and happy to be gone.”

### **The sober partner isn’t dependent on the other to maintain their sobriety. They have other sources of support.**

Sober people and their partners understand that sobriety isn’t a joint effort. The person not drinking is the one doing the work, and there are others best positioned to help them in this ongoing effort.

“I don’t rely on him solely,” said Stephens. “I don’t attend [AA] meetings so much anymore, but I developed these three really close friendships, and they get me the way he can’t get me, the way that only another alcoholic can get me.”

Likewise, Banks said that the support he needs from his partner is, in part, space to maintain the relationships he’s built with others in recovery.

“I have a whole community of friends that are 12-step friends. I run off to have those conversations in private. I help a lot of people, they helped me.”

“It’s not something we can share,” said Banks. “So he does give me a lot of space there.”

Tony’s role in Banks’ recovery work is supportive, but from the sidelines. “I don’t depend on him for my therapy, my recovery,” Banks explained.

Leigh said that when she first got together with Lee, she found his recovery story inspirational, but worried that she would need to quit drinking altogether, or ask for permission to drink in order to show her support. But she’s learned that his sobriety isn’t dependent upon her actions.

“We’ve been together for a year now. And it’s quite clear that I can drink quite freely around Stewart [Lee] and he’s not gonna fall back into that hole,” she said.

### **The drinking partner believes in the sober partner’s strength, and imagines a shared future in which they remain sober.**

One of the ways that a partner can support a person in recovery is to simply have faith in them.

“I was talking to people at a police and crime commissioners seminar about the process of getting sober and getting off drugs, and one of them said, ‘Do you think that the biggest thing was that someone had some belief in you that you could achieve something again?’ That’s the important thing with Rosie [Leigh]. If I say, ‘I’ve got this idea,’ she’s very supportive of it,” said Lee, who said Leigh provided this belief in him when it came to writing his memoir.

Leigh described her visions of their future, such as owning a home together, as another form of her support.

“I’m always thinking about the future and quite a forward-thinking kind of person ... thinking about stuff in the future that we can work towards, and I think that helps support you in a way, doesn’t it?” Leigh said during the couple’s joint interview.

“Having these other lifelong goals helps us both work towards something,” said Leigh.

Stephens said that as he became more confident in her sobriety, she got more comfortable sharing details of her experience with her husband. For example, she says the sight of most alcohol doesn’t usually bother her anymore, but the aroma of red wine — her former drink of choice — can still elicit a reaction.

“If I’ve had a great day and I’m really positive, it’s fine. If I get a whiff of that red wine and I’m having a day where I’m feeling less than, it’s not that I want to drink the wine, but I get this little pang of nostalgia,” said Stephens.

She no longer worries about sharing this sort of experience with her husband.

“I can always talk to him about it. Even these days, I can say, ‘Oh, my God, that wine smells good.’ I can share that with him, and he doesn’t get fearful.”

Stephens cites this kind of support as evidence that, with her marriage, she is “one of the lucky ones,” but her husband made it clear that he feels luck was on his side as well.

“I remember him writing me a letter saying, ‘When you first got sober, I was mostly happy for me. But now I’m really happy for you,’” she said.