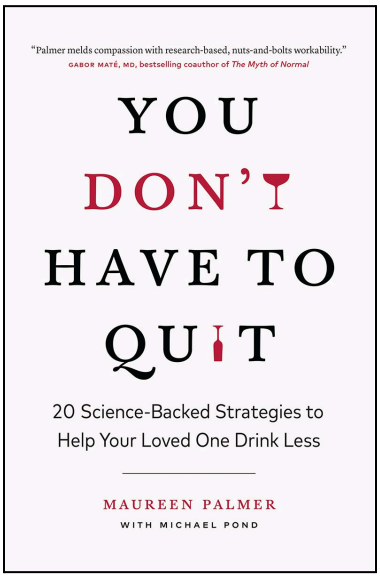

YOU DON'T HAVE TO QUIT
20 Science-Backed Strategies to Help Your Loved One Drink Less
Maureen Palmer
with Michael Pond
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"In *You Don't Have to Quit*, Maureen Palmer melds compassion with practicality, generosity of heart with common sense, loving intention with research-based, nuts-and-bolts workability."
—Gabor Maté M.D., New York Times best-selling co-author of *The Myth of Normal*

— An essential guide for tackling difficult conversations about a loved one's problematic drinking through effective, compassionate communication.
— Full of myth-busting, evidence-based advice, lauded by bestselling authors, medical professionals and advocates.
— Offers an important alternative to abstinence for the 50 percent of Canadians who consume more alcohol than recommended guidelines, but who don't necessarily have a dependence.
— With rare honesty and vulnerability, award-winning filmmaker and author—and her partner, a psychotherapist—reveal how they successfully battle his alcohol addiction.

In a world that glorifies alcohol—from signature cocktails to craft beer—helping a loved one with a drinking problem feels like a losing battle. You've begged, bargained and demanded they stop, only to see consumption ramp up and your relationship break down. This approach enforces a vicious cycle of confrontation, shame and more drinking. Author and filmmaker Maureen Palmer has been there, and she's found a better way.

In *You Don't Have to Quit*, Palmer shifts the conventional abstinence-only mindset to one that encourages positive change and harm reduction. She interviews world experts who've created successful tools, techniques and resources to help reduce or stop drinking entirely. Her twenty practical, science-backed strategies operationalize compassion and empathy—and healthy boundaries—to help your loved one drink less.

Nicole Magas
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With refreshing candor, Palmer shares her hard-won experience to debunk powerful myths that breed shame and secrecy and lead to relationship-killing conflict. This is the road map out of combat into collaboration and reduced consumption: harm reduction for the relationship too. Whether drinking less is a shared goal, or you want to influence your loved one in that direction, this book shows you how.

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MAUREEN PALMER is an author, journalist and filmmaker. After two award-winning decades as a broadcast producer, Maureen formed Bountiful Films with Helen Slinger. The duo has produced two decades' worth of powerful and critically acclaimed documentaries, including *Wasted*, which followed her partner Mike's search for evidence-based addiction treatment. Maureen also co-wrote, with Mike, *Wasted: An Alcoholic Therapist's Fight for Recovery in a Flawed Treatment System*. Maureen has become an advocate and subject matter expert, writing for many Canadian publications and businesses on the desperate need for evidence-based substance use treatment, including harm reduction approaches for alcohol.

Praise for *You Don't Have to Quit*

"If you've ever been ashamed to admit your partner struggles with alcohol and even more ashamed to admit you help them, this book is for you. In *You Don't Have to Quit*, Maureen Palmer delivers the modern, paradigm-shifting, evidence-based, shame- and judgment-free approach to help your loved one drink less. Mastering the tools in this book may help save your relationship and maybe even your loved one's life."

— Gabrielle Glaser, New York Times best-selling author of *Her Best Kept Secret: Why Women Drink and How They Can Regain Control*

"*You Don't Have to Quit*'s mix of myth busting, evidence-based knowledge and practical advice makes it a must-read for those wishing to support a family member or friend who drinks excessively."

— Dr Bernard Le Foll, Chair of Addiction Psychiatry at University of Toronto and Senior scientist at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health

"By applying harm reduction to alcohol, *You Don't Have to Quit* fills a massive void. It is a book that every problematic drinker's friends and family will wish they had found sooner."

— Travis Lupick, journalist and author of *Light Up the Night*

"Maureen (rightfully) questions the efficacy of trying to 'make' somebody quit drinking and instead illustrates that, with care and support, individuals can still heal and grow in the 'liminal' spaces between drinking, addiction, and abstinence."

— Dawn Nickel, co-founder of SHE RECOVERS Foundation

"Imagine a future in which everyone understands alcohol use disorder as a treatable health condition, and everyone knows how to compassionately support those around them. Inside this well-researched and hopeful book, you'll be amazed to discover that this future is entirely achievable. Right now."

— Heather Allen, chief communications officer of the Canadian alcohol use disorder Society

"Palmer demonstrates effective methods of communicating with partners about alcohol dependence through empathy, compassion, and an emphasis on results.

— Book Life, *Publisher's Weekly*

Alcohol Use Facts and Stats

There is no safe level of alcohol consumption.

- Alcohol consumption contributes to over 200 health conditions. Alcohol—even in small amounts—has been shown to contribute to cancer.
- Research has demonstrated that over 50 percent of people who died of cancer attributable to alcohol were moderate drinkers, consuming within weekly guidelines.

There has been a dramatic increase in alcohol-related deaths since the pandemic. With 50 percent of Canadians drinking more than the recommended guidelines, and one-third of Americans drinking excessively, many more are exposed to alcohol-related harms.

- New data from February 2024 by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reveals roughly 500 Americans died each day from alcohol in 2021. Record numbers of Canadians died from alcohol-related conditions during the pandemic.

The most damaging and dangerous form of excessive drinking is binging, which means consuming five or more drinks on an occasion for men and four or more drinks on an occasion for women.

- Binge drinking in 2022 was at its highest level in decades for those aged 35–50. During that period, alcohol-related deaths rose by 27 percent among men and 35 percent among women.
- More than 90 percent of adults in the U.S. who drink excessively report binge drinking.
- More than 40 percent of all alcohol-related deaths are associated with binge drinking. It also accounts for three-quarters of all economic costs linked to alcohol. Researchers consistently found that the number of heavy-drinking occasions more strongly predicted drinking problems than consumption level.

Not enough people get treatment for alcohol use disorder or are prescribed medications.

- Estimates from 26 countries worldwide suggest only seven percent of individuals with an AUD receive treatment.
- Medications proven to help symptoms of AUD are rarely prescribed. A 2019 survey found that of an estimated 14.1 million adults with AUD, only about 223,000 (less than one percent) used medications for their disorder.

- A 2023 study published in the journal *Addiction* found that between 2015 and 2019, only about one-third of people in British Columbia, who were diagnosed with moderate to severe alcohol use disorder were given these medications at least once. And less than five percent continued to use the medications for three months, the minimum time period recommended.

Loved ones can be a powerful force in the lives of heavy drinkers.

- Science proves that loved ones can be a powerful force for positive change in the lives of heavy-drinking loved ones, if only we know how.
- A study by the University of Buffalo found that almost 50 percent of marriages where one partner drank heavily, and the other didn't, ended in divorce.
- A pilot study involving the University of Stirling in Scotland found that more than four in five people have experienced pressure from friends to consume alcohol. 50 percent of people polled reported being pressured into drinking alcohol by colleagues and family, and 40 percent reported being encouraged by their partner.

An Interview with Maureen Palmer

Portions of this Q&A are available for media use. Please be in touch to book a full interview.

Why did you write this book?

Having spent my entire career in communications, first as a journalist, then as an independent filmmaker, I thought I was a pretty good communicator. But the longer I was in my relationship with Mike, who in the past suffered from a devastating alcohol use disorder, I realized when it came to alcohol, I did not communicate effectively at all. In fact, during and after Mike's rare bouts of drinking, how I spoke to him probably made things worse. And I'm not alone. When it comes to talking about heavy drinking, most of us struggle. We end up having angry conversations, mostly when dependence has become deeply entrenched. I wanted to share that there's a wealth of evidence-based approaches all aimed at bolstering motivation to change and many of us can learn them. If we talk effectively about alcohol use, I believe we can move many more of us to learn to drink less.

What did you learn?

Earlier in his life, my partner Mike lost everything to alcohol. He has been mostly abstinent for more than 15 years, but on rare occasions, battles a short bout of drinking. While filming a documentary search for evidence-based addiction treatment for CBC's The Nature of Things, we discovered an extensive tool kit of evidence-based therapies to help problem drinkers and their families. But few people know about it. Our doctors aren't well schooled in alcohol use disorder, and aren't familiar with the medications available. In this new book, I wanted to share our hard-earned knowledge about the science behind treatment, about new behavioral therapy techniques and also what we learned about strengthening relationships when one partner has AUD.

Why now?

Because there is a tremendous need for it. Science has proven no amount of alcohol is safe, yet a third of adult Americans drink excessively and 50 percent of Canadians drink more than the recommended guidelines. Heavy drinking and deaths associated with it surged during and since the pandemic. Yet for the most part, less than 1 in 10 get any treatment for substance use. I think if we as loved ones changed our mindset, didn't view total abstinence as the only measure of success, but began to reward any positive change, made conversations about drinking less angry and positional, our heavy-drinking loved ones would find it easier to embrace cutting back.

The title of this book has two meanings. Can you elaborate?

For a long time, quitting drinking, total abstinence, has been the "treatment" for people with AUD. But total abstinence is a high bar that many people can't meet, especially at the beginning of their journey to recovery. This book explores harm reduction for alcohol, which Mike and I see as a healthier option than continuing to drink too much. It's true that no amount of alcohol use is safe, but a person's healthier relationship with alcohol can

exist on a continuum that includes harm reduction and abstinence. So, indeed, you don't have to quit. Similarly, partners of those with AUD often have been told to "kick the bum out," to quit the relationship. But I love Mike and didn't want our relationship to end. Especially when we are talking about 1 or 2 nights of drinking a year. As his main support, I had to take a hard look at how my attitudes and behaviours affected his drinking and our relationship. We learned new ways of working together to help him with AUD. And believe it or not, that also helps me.

So how does harm reduction work when it comes to alcohol use disorder?

Ninety-four percent of those diagnosed with AUD either don't get or don't want treatment. Estimates from 26 countries say only 7 percent actually access treatment. We need to redefine treatment so more people will have more options to begin a discussion about drinking less. And 90 percent of heavy drinkers don't yet have a dependence. We have such an opportunity with that group to begin a healthier relationship with alcohol. Health educators say doctors are effective in promoting behaviour change when they talk about "pre-diabetes" with their patients. Why not the same approach with heavy drinking? There are medications to reduce cravings and withdrawal symptoms, there are skills that scaffold effective communication about alcohol, behavior modification techniques that work to reduce drinking. By talking about these simple, practical and cheap options, we can improve, and even save, relationships and lives.

Can you give me some examples of how you've learned to talk differently during and after a bout of drinking?

- I talk to myself first. I say he is not doing this to make me crazy. He is completely sober 363 of 365 days in a year and I need to commend him for the enormous willpower it must take to do that.
- I try to only say kind things as he detoxes and gets well again. He hates himself. I can't make him feel worse than he feels already. I remind myself my objective here is to get him back into his normal state of well-being as quickly as possible. By not dwelling on the slip, by living in a more positive than negative frame of mind, we move past this quickly. By being aware of my ratio of positive to negative comments. Mike says some of his drinking clients go for months without hearing anything but criticism.
- I remind him of his many strengths. I say "thank you" for buying just one mickey, for having the foresight to curtail his drinking to just one night.
- Research confirms behaviour change sticks if someone is allowed to explore and find their own intrinsic motivation, so I remind Mike of all the reasons he's chosen to be abstinent, as opposed to all of mine.
- I've found out the hard way that calling him names, fighting about pouring booze down the sink, slipping into fear-based catastrophic thinking hurts his recovery and our relationship. So I need to keep my wits about me. Because his brain is so dysregulated, so jangled by alcohol withdrawal, I know we need to rely on me now. But this is a two-way street. I am a first-rate idiot on occasion and I don't have a life-threatening disorder as an excuse. This man constantly treats me with

kindness and compassion. Because we've both learned by seeing each other through our rough patches, together we are ultimately better.

It's hard to be in a relationship with a person struggling with alcohol. Aren't you asking a lot of partners?

It's also hard to be in a relationship with someone who has cancer, or bipolar disorder. Serious alcohol dependence is a mental health condition; one that changes the structure of our brains, and I think we need to view those in our family with alcohol use disorders as worthy of the same compassion and respect as those afflicted with other serious conditions. That doesn't say we should become doormats. This doesn't work without effective boundaries during and after drinking episodes.

With around 50 percent of marriages where one partner has an AUD ending in divorce, our society has a vested interest in helping partners become effective at reducing alcohol use. We can all do a lot more to support our friends and family members who try to help the drinkers in their lives consume less. Think of the billions of dollars and lives saved, the disease burden lessened if we all get better at having effective conversations about alcohol. Ideally, we'd all get better at having these hard conversations long before a dependence sets in.

I'm asking a lot of our friends and family members too. Why allow us to flounder by ourselves? Judging us codependent or enabling is not helpful. Ask us, "How can we help?"