

Leveraging sober curiosity to support affluent midlife women toward alcohol reduction

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Introduction / Issues: Midlife women drink more alcohol than other female age groups, more than previous generations, and are among Australia's heaviest drinkers^{1 2}. Consumption frequency has increased during COVID-19³⁻⁵ and warrants urgent action toward reducing women's drinking. Simultaneously, the 'sober curious' movement has become prominent during the pandemic, through social media influencers who pitch non-drinking as beneficial/worthwhile – challenging the social acceptability of risky alcohol consumption.

Method / Approach OR Design and Methods: We investigated if current trends in popular wellness culture toward normalising non-drinking has leverage potential for public health by questioning 'are midlife women sober curious?' and 'if/how do life chances shape sober curiosity?' In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with 30 women (45-64 years) living in Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney from different social classes (working class, middle class and affluent). Interviews explored factors that make sober curiosity possible.

Key Findings: Affluent women (more than disadvantaged women) are open to sober curiosity to reduce alcohol intake. For these women, drinking alcohol was integral to social connections they wanted to retain, but they identified post-drinking regrets and that they wanted to reduce consumption. Affluent women had access to various wellness activities that could support sober curiosity, which were considered worthwhile within their social networks.

Discussions and Conclusions: The present hyper-focus on 'health consciousness' exacerbated by the pandemic offers crucial timing to explore potential in the sober curious movement to support alcohol reduction among affluent midlife women. It is important to explore sober curiosity in other groups of Australia's heavier drinkers.

Implications for Practice or Policy: Affluent populations are rarely the focus of alcohol reduction research⁶. Leveraging heavy drinking affluent women's openness and ability to be sober curious could make a large and direct impact on reducing population-level alcohol harms.

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