

This Week The Ark Foundation

Alcoholism in the pub trade is *the* issue that dare not speak its name. But help is on hand from people who know what it's like to have a drink problem in such circumstances – because they've been there. Phil Mellows reports

And one for yourself...

HOW DO you know when your drinking has become a problem? Ken Crosland has a simple answer – “when it's costing you more than money”.

Crosland should know. He's trashed two successful careers through drinking, and he now works for Ark for Business, an arm of the Ark Foundation which was set up to help people in the licensed trade with alcohol and drug problems as part of industry charity Hospitality Action. Its patrons are celebrity chefs Jamie Oliver and Heston Blumenthal.

Some of Crosland's job involves simply telling his story, and in any room of people there is always one, he says, who gets a chill of recognition that tells them they might have a problem too.

The story begins in New York where Crosland, in his early 20s, had landed after a spell of travelling. He got a job waiting in a top restaurant, and he was

Crosland lost his job and returned to the UK in his late 20s, feeling he could control his drinking back home.

Out of the frying pan...

But his new career was in another industry known for heavy drinking – the media. There were long lunches with clients and everyone liked a drink after work – and Crosland would carry on at home.

“My kitchen table was my park bench. I used to sit there late at night replaying my resentments and putting everything straight. Then next morning I had to face it all again,” he recalls. “Most Mondays I quit drinking but by Tuesday I'd started again. I thought my problem was that sixth pint of Stella, but it's not about how much you're drinking but what it's doing to your life.”

with staff seminars. The idea is to create a culture in which people don't feel ashamed to say they might have a drink problem, and a management that recognises the symptoms, takes the problem seriously and has a positive approach to dealing with it. This might involve changing shift patterns to relieve the stress that probably lies behind the problem, or allowing time off for treatment.

There may be a legal angle too. If an alcohol problem is brought to the attention of management there is a duty of care towards that employee. If nothing is done and the drinking leads to a sacking the employee could have a case.

And there's also a hard-nosed commercial argument. Reducing absenteeism and poor performance caused by drinking saves money.

The availability of alcohol

Over the last three years Ark for Business has made good progress in the hotel and restaurant sectors but the pubs sector lags behind – and not because there isn't a problem.

“It's a high risk industry. It's about the hours, the stress and the availability of alcohol. That all fits pubs and pubs are a logical thing for us to do,” says Crosland.

“The strength of Ark is that we've worked in the industry and we've beaten alcohol problems. We're not against alcohol, there's no finger-wagging and there's a lot of humour in what we do.”

“There's so much stigma attached to alcohol problems, and it's the stigma that kills people because they go into denial. Ark aims to de-stigmatise addiction and show a way out of it. If we can get people to come forward early enough, we'd have a 100 per cent success rate.” ■

• To find out more about the Ark Foundation visit <http://is.gd/4TsmW> or call Hospitality Action on 020 3004 5500

very good at it. But within a year, he believes, he had the beginnings of a drink problem.

“It was long, anti-social hours and a stressful environment,” he says. “After service I used booze to unwind, relax, and the problem sneaked up on me. I started using cocaine which disguised the alcoholic effect – but then I drank more to calm down. I used to get the most horrendous hangovers at work, I wasn't doing my job properly and I had bad relationships with my co-workers. I'd call in sick, let everyone down.”

“I'd start most days meaning not to drink but ended up drunk every day. It was out of control.”

After 10 years Crosland was drinking in the mornings, got the sack, and at 39 realised he had to do something or he'd drink himself to death. He has now been sober for 12 years.

One incident in his drinking career he never forgets is when he went to tell his boss he thought he might have a problem. “He told me ‘it's been a hard day’ and took me down the pub. He had no other way of dealing with the issue,” he says.

And that's exactly what Crosland's trying to put right with Ark for Business, working with pubs and other hospitality businesses to put alcohol policies in place, training managers and raising awareness

The Ark Foundation This Week



'It's rampant in pubs'

You've had a long, busy session behind the pumps. The last customer has gone, you've said goodnight to the barstaff, put the sparklers into soak and slid the bolt. And you're still buzzing. You need to wind down or you'll never get to sleep. A drink would be a good idea. Or would it?

There's nothing wrong with having a drink, of course, despite the sensational headlines and the growing clamour from the anti-alcohol lobby. But those who've been in the trade for long enough will tell you that drink is one of the hazards of running a pub, as it is across the whole hospitality industry.

There are no figures on it. Drink problems tend to be swept under the carpet. Publicans don't like it to be known they've got a problem and pubcos are reluctant to get involved or draw attention to it.

John Hill, a former Whitbread area manager who since 1993 has been an independent stress and trauma counsellor within the pub industry, sees alcohol problems frequently in the course of his work.

“There's no doubt it's rampant throughout the business,” he says. “Winding down with a beer can be quite dangerous. My alternative is go and scrub out the cellar!”

Having a drink to help face the pressures ahead is another way that licensees can start a drink problem. “It's in the macho culture of the industry. Being stressed is seen as a weakness,” says Hill. Hill has his stories, like the licensee who drank a bottle of pale ale every half hour from 10am, fell asleep in the afternoons, and carried on drinking a bottle of pale ale through the evening.

“People will tell you they're okay because they don't touch the top shelf, but alcohol doesn't care where it comes from,” says John. “Beer can be just as bad as spirits.”

Eventually the licensee was told by his doctor to cut his consumption by half. “So he stopped drinking in the mornings and made an amazing discovery – afternoons!” says Hill.

“There's a lot of pressure in running a pub,” he adds. “It's tough. People drink to help them do the job. They feel it helps them face the day, that they can't function till they've had a drink. That's the starting point and it might be 10 years before it develops into a problem.”

“Licensees don't understand the power of alcohol. They think they can beat it. It's comforting, easy and it makes them feel great. But it's harder to kick than heroin.”