

FEATURES

Not your average skid row drunk

Sarah Allen Benton is hardly your stereotypical alcoholic. She has a master of science degree from Northeastern University and is a licensed mental health counselor at Emmanuel College in Boston. In recovery from alcoholism for the last five years, she has written an enlightening new book about people like herself, *Understanding the High-Functioning Alcoholic* (Praeger Publishers).

As Benton describes them, high-functioning alcoholics are able to maintain respectable, even high-profile lives, usually with a home, family, job and friends. That balancing act continues until something dreadful happens that reveals the truth — to themselves or to others — and forces the person to enter a treatment program or lose everything that means anything.

A HIDDEN PROBLEM

Typical high-functioning alcoholics, or HFAs, as Benton calls them, are in denial about their abuse of alcohol. Co-workers, relatives and friends often enable the abusive behavior to continue by refusing to acknowledge and confront it.

"The story of the HFA is seldom told," Benton writes, "for it is not one of obvious tragedy, but that of silent suffering."

Based on surveys and professional experience, she estimates that as many as half of all alcoholics are high-functioning types. The abuse can go on for decades until and unless some alcohol-related crisis occurs, like being arrested for drunken driving, being exposed for having made unwanted sexual advances or being asked for a divorce when their spouses can no longer tolerate the abusive drinking.

Or, like Benton, they may seek help after recognizing that no matter what they try, they are unable to drink normally and fearing that sooner or later their luck will run out.

Many well-known people have publicly acknowledged their battles with alcohol and entered recovery before their lives were destroyed. Among those listed by Benton are Betty Ford, the astronaut Buzz Aldrin, the actresses Elizabeth Taylor and Mary Tyler Moore, the actor Robin Williams, the singers Keith Urban and Eric Clapton, the football legend Joe Namath and former US president George W. Bush.

But there are millions of others — including dentists and doctors, professors and teachers, lawyers and judges, journalists and authors, firemen and CEOs of major

companies — who work for years while abusing alcohol, sometimes putting their lives, and the lives of others, at great risk. Surgeons have been known to operate with shaking hands, yet colleagues who knew or suspected that alcohol abuse was the cause failed to confront the doctor. Employees who suspect a problem often cover up for their bosses. Benton emphasized that people in positions of power are often the hardest to detect and help, because they tend not to be closely supervised at work, they are assumed to be able to deal successfully with the pressures of their jobs, their high pay enables them to escape the financial consequences of excessive drinking, and they see drinking as their reward for hard work.

As the writer Pete Hamill said in his memoir, *A Drinking Life*, "If I was able to function, to get the work done, there was no reason to worry about drinking. It was part of living, one of the rewards."

In some cases, the culture of the workplace fosters high-functioning alcoholism. Abusive drinking was once commonplace among journalists, who had "liquid lunches" and frequently met for drinks after work. When work and social lives blend, excessive drinking may be considered part of the job.

DOUBLE LIVES

A further problem in identifying and getting help for high-functioning alcoholics is that they often do not meet the criteria for alcohol abuse described in the psychiatric diagnostic manual. They have good jobs, perform the expected tasks of daily life and avoid legal problems.

As Mark Willenbring of the National Institute for Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism put it in Benton's book: "People can be dependent and not have abuse problems at all. They're successful students. They're good parents, good workers. They watch their weight. They go to the gym. Then they go home and have four martinis or two bottles of wine. Are they alcoholics? You bet."

As for herself, Benton said: "Having outside accomplishments led me and others to excuse my drinking and avoid categorizing me as an alcoholic. My success was the mask that disguised the underlying demon and fed my denial."

Even those who recognize they have an alcohol problem may avoid seeking help, because they perceive it as a sign of weakness.

High-functioning alcoholics are highly

skilled at leading double lives, Benton wrote. They appear to the outside world to be managing life well and defy the alcoholic stereotype by being fashionable, physically attractive, even elegant. They also tend to hide their excessive consumption by drinking alone or sneaking alcohol before or after a social event, and disguising or excusing the odor of alcohol on their breath.

High-functioning alcoholics also may not be physically addicted to alcohol, abstaining for days or weeks without suffering withdrawal symptoms. But they are psychologically dependent on alcohol, often focused on when they can drink again and convinced that they need to drink in certain settings. They are also likely to experience blackouts, remembering nothing the next day about a night of heavy drinking, with only a hangover as evidence of their abusive behavior.

"But just because people are high-functioning doesn't mean they are not putting themselves and others in danger," Benton said in an interview. Under the influence of excessive amounts of alcohol, they may operate motor vehicles or dangerous machinery or engage in risky sexual encounters. They may be picked up for driving under the influence, miss important professional or family obligations, or repeatedly arrive late to work. And, Benton said, "They can face the same health risks as a lower-functioning alcoholic."

KNOWING THE SIGNS

In the interview, Benton listed several characteristics that can help people recognize themselves as high-functioning alcoholics:

- They have trouble controlling their intake even after deciding that they will drink no more alcohol than a given amount.
- They find themselves thinking obsessively about drinking — when and where and with whom they will drink next.
- When they drink, they behave in ways that are uncharacteristic of their sober self.
- They experience blackouts, unable to remember what took place during a drinking bout.

"It's not the number of drinks that defines an alcoholic," Benton said. "It's what happens to you when you're drinking."

(This is the first of two columns on recognizing abusers of alcohol. Next Tuesday: A new way to help identify the problem drinker.)

Respectable, high-achieving and presentable — hardly the usual stereotype of a problem drinker. But Sarah Allen Benton estimates as many as half of all alcoholics are high-functioning types

BY JANE E. BRODY
NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE NEW YORK

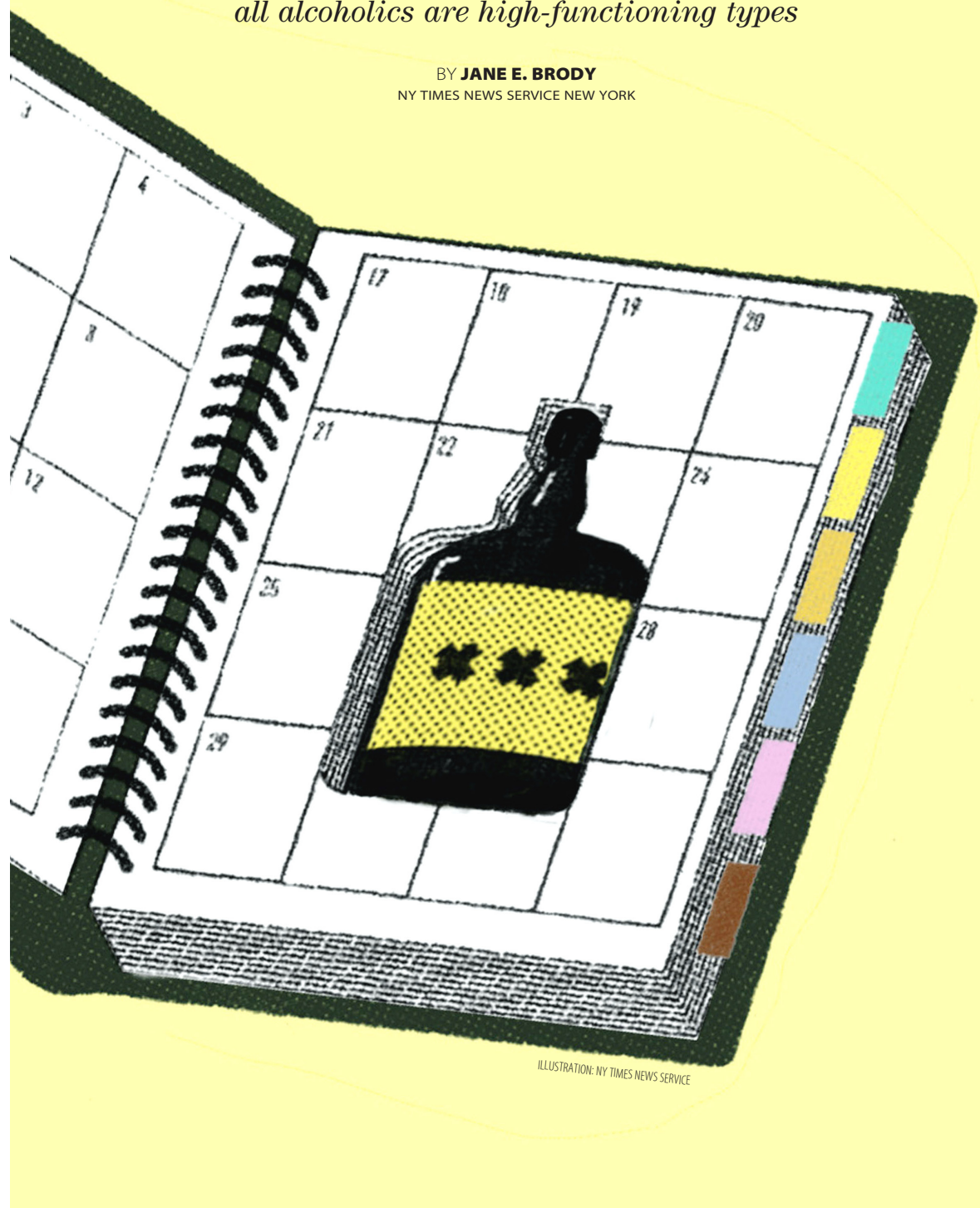


ILLUSTRATION BY NY TIMES NEWS SERVICE

ENVIRONMENT

Activists and scientists send out SOS for 'Amazon of the oceans'

The huge marine ecosystem known as the Coral Triangle, one of the most diverse on Earth, takes center stage at this week's World Oceans Conference, where leaders will grapple with the problems of climate change, overfishing and poverty

BY AUBREY BELFORD
AFP, NUSA LEMBONGAN, INDONESIA



Above: A small boat carries tourists through a mangrove forest during a tour of Nusa Penida on the Indonesian resort island of Bali.



Right: A fish swims over coral in the waters surrounding Nusa Penida, a small island off the coast of Bali.

With its pleasure boats dipping on the horizon and clustered tourist restaurants, the Indonesian island of Nusa Lembongan looks little like the edge of a great wilderness.

But according to scientists, this small and scrubby island off Bali is one corner of a huge marine ecosystem touted as the most diverse on Earth — and a key environmental battleground for a planet grappling with climate change.

The area is known as the Coral Triangle, and stretching across six nations between the Indian and Pacific oceans — Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, East Timor, Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands — it is impressive in scale.

About half the size of the continental US, the triangle is home to more than half the world's coral reefs, three-quarters of its coral species and key stocks of fish that help feed the world.

"People have compared the Coral Triangle's biodiversity richness to the Amazon," said Abdul Halim, the head of The Nature Conservancy's (TNC) Coral Triangle Center.

But, as in the Amazon, the area's huge biodiversity is matched by a daunting set of challenges.

Overfishing, climate change and impoverished communities are all taking their toll on the region.

As nations meet in the Indonesian city of Manado in the coming week for the World Oceans Conference, the Coral Triangle is being touted as a key target in efforts to conserve the health of the oceans, to both battle climate change and adapt to its consequences.

A meeting of leaders from the six nations of the Coral Triangle Initiative, which was formed in 2007, is set to launch a plan to save the region, which has already been pledged hundreds of millions of US dollars by international donors.

However, those involved in conserving the region say it will be a hard fight.

Slipping under the clear waters off Lembongan, the threat of destruction can seem distant. Fish from across the color spectrum flit among bright corals in a concentration of life unthinkable on land.

Scientists say the area has withstood the pressures of human misuse and nature better than most, and that is precisely what makes it so important.

"It has the highest diversity anywhere on the planet, if you talk about marine life," said Lida Pet Soede, the head of environmental group WWF's Coral Triangle Initiative Network.

"It has the most species of corals, the most species of fish, every other marine organism ... All sorts of stuff, it has the most of it," she said.

The Coral Triangle's variety of species means life here has an in-built coping mechanism to deal with outside stresses, and serves as the "nursery of the seas" for species facing collapse elsewhere, Soede said.

About 30 percent of the world's tuna is caught here and populations are relatively healthy but by no means beyond threat.

Unlike other massive coral reefs, such as Australia's threatened Great Barrier Reef, the area has also proved resistant to the effects of climate change, thanks to a constant welling of water between the Pacific and Indian oceans that keeps temperatures relatively stable.

But as temperatures rise and industrial fishing fleets in other parts of the world are forced to ever more obscure and deep corners for dwindling catches, the stresses on the Coral Triangle are likely to prove too much, Soede said.

"As reserves everywhere else are going down the pressure is on, everyone is going to want to come here," she said.

"It's very likely that this will be one of the last areas where you still have significant production of seafood, but this area will not be able to feed the world.

"It's not just about fish and food but the very fact of certain species that we don't even know exist ... that may be the cure for HIV."

"If that particular organism or particular ecosystem is gone before we figure it out, it's a big loss."

About 120 million people living in the Coral Triangle depend on the seas for their livelihoods, and although they are among the greatest potential victims of the collapse of local ecosystems, they also often play the role of vandals.

Spread out on thousands of islands across porous national borders, many living in impoverished communities have turned to poisoning fish with cyanide or blowing them up with dynamite, said Marthen Welly, who runs a TNC program at Nusa Lembongan and its neighboring islands.

"Middlemen tie up the fishermen with debt for life. The fishermen have to pay back their debts by selling fish every day, but it's the middlemen who set the price and they set it as low as possible," he said.

"Sometimes fishermen know that using bombs and cyanide breaks the law and wrecks the reefs, but they're also squeezed."

The approach of non-governmental organizations and governments has been to try to introduce alternative livelihoods and get communities on board in protecting the environment through so-called Marine Protected Areas (MPAs).

If everything goes to plan, Nusa Lembongan will soon be covered by one of the MPAs, which already spread over about 10,000 hectares in Indonesia.

The area has been a relative success without outside help. Tourist dollars and the introduction of seaweed farming in the 1980s have lifted local farmers and fishermen out of desperate poverty, and put conservation on the agenda.

"Before there was seaweed we could count with our hands who could eat. They were the ones with big plots of land that could plant trees, corn, coconuts," said 37-year-old seaweed farmer Wayan Suwarbawa, who is working with the TNC.

"Even though we're just farmers, we're obliged to spread the importance of preserving sea ecosystems," he said.

But even if other areas — which in most Coral Triangle countries tend to be much poorer — can replicate the successes of Nusa Lembongan, the root of the problem remains with climate change and a growing global population hungry for fish, WWF's Soede said.

"If you don't take away the drivers like unsustainable consumption patterns or other influences then your conservation dollar on the ground is not going to be very effective. It's pretty much a waste," she said.