

REAL LIFE

Meet the middle-class 'sophisticated alcoholics'

A new book is turning our concept of alcoholism, and how to treat it, on its head

Lisa Jewell

ljewell@independent.ie

ARE you just a 'normal' person who maybe enjoys a few drinks after work or a few glasses of wine at home – it's all part of unwinding, just a bit of harmless letting off of steam. You're in control though – it's not as if you can't get up for work in the morning or forget to pay the mortgage.

However you may be part of a new breed of 'sophisticated alcoholic', which is also the title of a new book by an English therapist, David Allen, who specialises in alcohol dependency. Allen's book focuses on a group of people who have been dubbed 'middle-class drinkers'.

"These people don't really see themselves as having a problem with alcohol – they have a normal life and would be considered Mr and Mrs Normal," Allen says.

"But they are drinking excessive amounts of alcohol – well above the recommended limits. They drink in an organised and managed fashion. They're not the ones who crash the car because they were drunk but they do have an alcohol problem."

The book addresses this group of people and provides strategies to reduce their drinking. Allen himself once belonged to this group and says he could easily put away 60 to 70 units of alcohol a week.

"I saw myself as being in control of my drinking – I wouldn't drink when it was going to affect the things that I do." But Allen's drinking had become a big part of his life and he had formed friendships purely on the basis of a shared drinking habit.

"One of the things that influenced me to deal with the problem was that a friend of mine died from cancer of the oesophagus. He was a heavy drinker and the cancer was alcohol related. His death stopped me in my mental tracks."

Allen developed a hypnotherapy audio CD and believes that



Struggle: memorials to the singer Amy Winehouse, who lost her battle with alcohol in July. Left: author and therapist David Allen

listening to it over and over during the editing stage helped him with his alcohol dependency.

"The Sophisticated Alcoholic' also breaks free from the decades-old theory that alcoholism is a disease. Instead it maintains that it is a behaviour, which has become a divisive issue for health professionals.

"I don't believe that alcoholism is a disease – it's a behaviour," Allen says. "Saying it is a disease can become a convenient excuse for people dependent on alcohol."

"It's a behaviour and it's a choice and both are caused by something that's going on emotionally. There's no question that some part of alcohol dependency does become a physical condition and the person may need medication to help them with their withdrawal symptoms while the body gets used to not consuming alcohol."

"But I think it's unhelpful to refer to alco-

holism as an illness except in the sense that it causes serious illness."

Allen points out that the advantage of calling it a disease is that it removes some of the shame for alcoholics. But he argues that, at the same time, it strips them of some of the responsibility they have in their own addiction.

Addiction

It's a point of view that psychologist Colin O'Driscoll, who is the course director of the BA in Addiction Counselling at ATI Psychology Institute Dublin, agrees with.

"There has been a very strong association with the disease model but this dates back many years and we know a lot more now about the way that addiction works," he says.

"I would categorise alcoholism more as a behaviour. There is a movement away from the medical model of alcoholism which focuses on it being a disease and nowadays addic-

tion studies include lots of different models.

"The assessment criteria for a disease don't fit with alcoholism – if you think about how every day people stop drinking, that's not like a disease."

"The problem with treating it like a disease is that it tends to become a self-fulfilling prophecy. If people dependent on alcohol are told that they have a disease and it's primary,

