

From Binge to Blackout

Q & A

a conversation with Toren and Chris

Why does the book *From Binge to Blackout* appeal to such a wide audience?

Toren: Alcohol is the #1 drug of choice for our nation's youth, and binge drinking is the most widespread health problem on college campuses. Most families are faced with alcohol issues, whether they are the daily decisions of adolescents, their freshman at college, or a relative who is struggling with an alcohol problem. Our culture seems to condone alcohol use even though it causes all kinds of problems in our households and for our society. Parents are concerned about their kids' drinking choices. Youth are bombarded with alcohol choices, clever marketing and peer pressure, making alcohol more alluring than ever. Educators, parents, students and families relate to our mom and son voices and the honesty of our story. It is giving people something to grab on to, talk about, and most importantly, when there is a problem, it is giving families hope.

What is it you'd most like people to understand when they read *From Binge to Blackout*?

Chris: Alcohol affects adolescents differently than adults. We now know how damaging alcohol is to the adolescent brain. Research about alcohol has improved. There is currently more awareness of genetics and the link to alcoholism. 30 percent of college students abuse alcohol and 6 percent meet the criteria for alcohol dependency. 48 percent of college kids said they drink alcohol to get drunk and 80 percent of high school seniors have tried alcohol in the U.S. It's time for parents and kids to talk together about the decision to drink alcohol, not just about car crashes, but about how alcohol is a potent drug that causes changes in the brain and affects many behaviors that can be long-lasting and tragic.

What type of research did you do in writing *From Binge to Blackout*?

Toren: Just like college, I stayed away from the academic part of this process. My research has been experiential. My methodology was done in binges, my reports are spewed onto the pages in our book, and the results are my current abstinence from all drug use (including alcohol). My conclusion is that alcohol is a powerful, dangerous drug that changed my life in negative ways, ways I couldn't identify until it was too late.

Chris: To begin with, I wanted to find a book that described the family experience--the whole picture of the alcohol culture where not only the teen is considered, but all the people who live with him. I looked in bookstores, but there was nothing I could find that seemed real. Then I looked on the Web where I located many helpful articles and links. Still, they didn't carry over to our living room. At that point I realized the need for an up-front book discussing binge drinking and its effects on the family.

Discovering what had happened to Toren and our family began as soon as I received the first e-mail description of his battle with alcohol addiction. Over the course of the next three years, I attended numerous state prevention summits, talked with hundreds of counselors, treatment specialists and university professors, read current studies and literature, and combed through our family alcohol history. Toren and I discussed every facet of addiction. My research is not a finite event. Each day I learn something astounding about the drinking culture and my place in it.

How did *From Binge to Blackout* come about? Who came up with the idea?

Toren: *From Binge to Blackout* slowly wrote itself. My first inquiries came from scribbling in my journal when I was still living in South America in 2003. I knew that I was having more and more problems with alcohol and one night I wrote for a few straight hours in my journal. When I went into rehab 4 months later, I typed out that entry and sent it to my family. Not only was I admitting my alcoholism, I spelled it out in what later manifested itself as the first chapter of my writing (Chapter 4, *My Drink*). My parents were shocked by my admissions and descriptions. How could this be the same family? My mom was so horrified that she began her own writing. Later, while my mom was visiting me at rehab and we were in line at the cafeteria, she first brought up the idea to me. She thought my writing (and ours combined) could be useful to more people than just ourselves. I was doubtful and couldn't imagine what it would all be about. But I said, "Okay, let's think about it after I get out of here."

Chris: When I first saw Toren's journal writing, its abrupt power and brutal honesty, I knew our family needed to face the true world of alcohol. It forced me to rethink our history. Out of desperation, I began writing in my journal. When the paper began to stack up, I asked Toren what he thought about creating a book. I wasn't sure if it would be a good thing for us, stirring up all that turmoil.

Describe the process of writing the book, what was it like?

Toren: The writing process has been a mess of e-mail attachments, phone conversations, and cutting and pasting of our lives. I continued my writing in the same style as my first journal entry. For the remainder of the first edition, I wrote my portions from the public library while in the halfway program in Florida. A year later, we began working with Penguin, and expanded on our newer experiences and all that we had learned along the way. In the end, I have written chapters and different sections of the book in Florida, New York, New Orleans, Washington State, and California—excluding all of the edits we have made on the road while out speaking. There has been no such thing as 'home base' for me. Considering this is mother-son effort there has been a lot of teamwork, learning, and debate. Our phone bills have been huge too, because there were many long, peripheral talks on the phone. We have gone numerous places to meet up and work on the book. This project has really just weaved itself through the last few years, growing with us and taking on each new change. We would never have guessed that this is where it would lead.

Chris: Toren and I each wrote our portions independently. We merged the material by e-mailing documents between numerous states. During Toren's halfway experience, we met twice to go over some of the drafts. Later on, we barely rescued five chapters from Toren's apartment in the wake of Katrina. Toren revealed painful information about his prior alcohol and drug use up until the last minute, even when I thought he had already spit out the worst. Then, I had to look again at our family and wonder where I'd been all those years. The whole experience seems like a tangle of words and emotions writhing back and forth across the U.S.

What kinds of decisions did you have to make personally in order to write the book?

Toren: I basically had to decide that I wasn't going to change the content in order to cater to any certain person and that I would try to really portray how alcohol affected me. I had to stop worrying about what friends, brothers, parents, therapists, authors, experts or strangers would think. I just had to tell what I remember and what it all meant to me. At various times I think both my mom and I have had to re-evaluate ourselves. We have had to make sure that we want to go through with this. In the second edition, I have taken on even more ownership of the book, our message and what this issue means to me. I

still believe that this is more about the alcohol culture and the denial of our nation rather than my personal trials and tribulations. I hope our experiences only allow people to make more informed decisions. I don't want people to change because we say they should. In fact, people will do what they are going to do, just like I did. Along the same lines, I renew my personal decision not to drink or use drugs today. We all get that choice.

Chris: I had to face reality. I had to step up and say it like it was. I had to be honest with every family member about my own feelings and reactions. In order to do this, I began to ask difficult questions about myself and my culture. I decided to scrape away the veneer of shiny parenthood.

***From Binge to Blackout* exposes you to public scrutiny, why write a book like this?**

Toren: I had to expose myself to my family, friends and acquaintances in order to leave South America, go into rehab, and go to the halfway house...so this is really just one more level of honesty. I am less concerned about what the public thinks than about what my friends or family think. Too often, people cover up their mistakes, in fear of the stigma or labels. . . especially when it comes to addiction. By me stepping up and acknowledging my shortcomings and owning my actions, I have nothing else to hide. I find that people respect me just the same (for the most part) and relate to me as a real person rather than having the whole town know about it but only talking out the sides of their mouths about me. Putting a face to an issue as stigmatized as alcoholism wasn't an easy choice, but maybe it will help change the way our culture views alcoholism and addiction. Maybe the whisper can be more of an open dialogue. Do you think we are ready for that? We hope so.

Chris: Being inspected will be difficult. But through the years, I have learned that each time I think I'm doing a better job of parenting than someone else, it's not true. The myth of the perfect little family behind the white picket fence isn't my yard. It's much easier to be who I really am than try to fool everyone. I am the mother of Toren.

How did you react to one another's first writings?

Toren: I was extremely interested in what my mom had to say. Some of it made me feel like shit and some of it gave me a better understanding of my impact on the family. For the most part I benefited from reading each new chapter as it came along and I think both of us enjoyed the process of painting two sides of the story. Sometimes it was just downright painful, though.

Chris: Toren's first journal entry was shocking to read. I couldn't believe what I saw printed before me. It was a world I never thought one of my children would inhabit. His words caused me to re-evaluate everything I had done as a parent, and the writing ultimately turned into a description of our family and our values, one that I could hardly admit. When we merged our writing, my chapters describing a certain time period did not match his portrayals. This is when I had to acknowledge that moms and sons have two different versions of growing up.

Toren, when did you first start drinking, how much were you drinking, and how did you know you were becoming an alcoholic?

Toren: My first real drinks were at the age of fourteen, but today kids are drinking at an even younger age. By the time I was done with my freshman year of high school, I was regularly smoking marijuana, cigarettes, and drinking beer. By age sixteen, I had quit one sports team, was on my way to being kicked off 3 others for various substance infractions or off-campus arrests, and had already been caught vomiting and blacked-out by my parents. In fear of getting into trouble, I remember telling my friends at age sixteen that we needed to

'start fresh' and learn how to have fun without drugs and alcohol on the weekends. That was already a challenge.

Even in college, after being forced to attend AA meetings at age nineteen, I didn't see my drinking as a problem and I *certainly* felt I wasn't an alcoholic. I drank hard most every weekend but never drank much during the weekdays. Anywhere from 10-15 beers on a given day/night seemed to put me where I wanted to be. The amount wasn't as important to me as the effects—I was in it for the buzz. And I ignored all the bad effects while managing to complete class work on the weekdays. By college graduation I was a full blown alcoholic (age twenty-two), but I didn't allow myself the chance to be honest.

It wasn't until I left the country six months after college graduation to work in the Peace Corps that I began to realize my drinking was more and more out of control. In a new culture without my drinking peers or party environments, I realized that all my old habits had stayed with me and that I was experiencing worse symptoms of physical dependence. From there, blackouts and withdrawal symptoms slowly broke down my denial over about seven-and-a-half-months of on-and-off drinking in South America. I still didn't believe I was an alcoholic until after some time rehab, though. It was a long road, but for many it is much longer and a hell of a lot bumpier.

Chris, when did you first start to worry about Toren's drinking, and how did you react to him becoming an alcoholic?

Chris: I first worried about Toren's drinking when we caught him intoxicated at age fifteen. He seemed to bounce back too fast the next morning, and I wondered if that was a normal reaction. Then, when he repeatedly got into trouble for alcohol use and did not change his behaviors, I was baffled. How could it be so important to him to continue his use when it caused him so many problems? Finally, when he went to rehab, I began to understand his symptoms and learned how addiction to alcohol (or any other drug) has common traits. I could have spotted those red flags years earlier had I been better educated about alcohol abuse.

Toren, what will you tell your kids?

Toren: Whoa...slow down. I can't imagine being put in charge of anything else...let alone my own actions. The approach I would take with my own hypothetical kids would be one of all-out honesty and openness (yes, obviously the book will make this the most likely option). But still, knowing my dangerous genes and own history, I would be ready to start the dialogue with my kids early. I would realize that they want to make their own decisions and that they would have to face their own consequences. I would give them clear expectations and consequences when they mess up, but most importantly I would want them to know my stance on the dangers and risks of abuse and addiction. They would deserve the same support I've had, if they too, needed to get sober. It is not the end of the world, this sobriety thing, and actually it has been the start of a new world of possibility for me.

Chris, what is your message today for parents?

Chris: It will take all of us to impact the alcohol culture. Here is what I have found to be important: Start dialogue with kids early about alcohol. Remember that alcohol is not a benign substance and learn about the consequences of youth alcohol abuse. Do not perceive underage and binge drinking as inevitable. Parents can combat the way media portrays alcohol as glamorous. Don't be afraid to ask questions about alcohol use or to seek professional help early if problems arise. Parents are the most listened-to resource by teens in alcohol decision-making. Never give up.

Toren, what is it like being young and in recovery? Is it difficult to stay sober?

Toren: It is unbelievable. I never would have thought that I would be 'that guy' among all of my friends. But I am glad to be. I have so much more freedom and choice in my life than I had when I drank like I used to. I see things completely differently. It is more about how I spend my time and all of the opportunities I see now. When I was in school those things weren't as important to me because I had a fixed pool of friends, an assigned role as a student, and a crazy, irresponsible social life. I used to be very apathetic about a lot of things. . .I just drank.

As a young adult I get to decide what kind of person I will become, I choose what kind of activities I participate in and how I interact with other people. These days I don't have the kind of regrets that I used to have. I don't have hangovers, or endure withdrawals every weekend and I am no longer enslaved to drugs and alcohol. I mean what I say now, and people trust me. My family can count on me now. I have relative organization in my life. I am sane in good ways. I can still be creative, and be the person I want be. Many people may say that this is how we are supposed to be, but none of those things were true when I was drinking.

When drinking heavily, I lost my direction, my self-worth and control of my life. Sometimes I have to re-evaluate my sobriety, and I work hard to renew my decision not to drink or use drugs one day at a time. My life is better this way, but there is still temptation out there. I can't forget where I came from. Staying sober has to be my priority and isn't always easy. I have to be careful with certain friends. I have formed new relationships with people whose lives aren't centered on alcohol. I still go to rock shows, play music and go to parties, but now I am able to participate, remember them, AND drive home. Life is very good sober.

Chris, how have other parents, friends and family members responded to your family's experience? Do people see you differently now that your son is an alcoholic?

Chris: When people first learned about Toren's rehab and halfway house experience, some expressed disappointment and regret. But, in fact, this was the best thing that ever happened to our family. It allowed us to open up to one another and discuss a dilemma that had been crippling our spirit. Moreover, we were suddenly able to be honest with our friends and community members about a problem that plagues 20 percent of our society: alcohol abuse and addiction. I have found that people are much more willing to talk frankly with me about themselves after hearing about us. They are refreshed to find that they don't have to maintain some preconceived image of what a "good parent" or "successful mom," or even what a "model child" would be. The stigma surrounding alcohol use has lifted from our family, and people are anxious to have that same relief for their own families.

Where can people go to get help?

Toren: Most college campuses have prevention and wellness centers with trained staff to assess and assist students without blame. Even high school counselors will talk to students with confidentiality. I wasn't ready to talk in high school, but some kids may be. When I was in college I was still lying through my teeth about what I was up to, and I would have been very defensive about my own drinking habits. If someone wants help or is curious, then they are way ahead of where I was. I was too scared of the truth to even look at my behaviors realistically. Any high school or college kid that is not afraid to make their own decisions or ask for help has much more courage than I did.

Chris: There is help everywhere. Sometimes parents or kids may only want to ask questions. That's a good way to start. School counselors have told me they wish more parents would stop by. Locally, many community social services provide help on a sliding scale. Insets in our book list national hotline phone numbers. AA or Al-anon is helpful. Or see a professional substance abuse counselor.

What were your goals in writing From Binge to Blackout?

Toren: We made a list of reasons early in our work, because we wanted to have a clear idea of why we were writing. We hope:

- to fill in the gap between what's really happening with young drinkers today and what society perceives about young drinkers;
- to help someone possibly recognize early symptoms of alcohol addiction/abuse;
- to help parents and kids talk more openly about alcohol use;
- to inform others about alcohol addiction and the disease of alcoholism;
- to support parents and enable them to realistically examine alcohol use in their family;
- to educate kids about their drinking choices
- to dissolve the glamour of chronic heavy drinking;
- to heal our family

Chris: Our mission is to talk honestly to kids and families about alcohol choices and the consequences of heavy drinking.