

Ep #21: Stop Telling Yourself You Can't Drink



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With Your Host

Rachel Hart

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You are listening to the *Take a Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, episode 21. Welcome to the *Take a Break* podcast with Rachel Hart. If you're an alcoholic or an addict, this is not the show for you, but if you are someone who has a highly functioning life, doing very well but just drinking a bit too much and wants to take a break, then welcome to the show. Let's get started.

Hello everyone, how are you? How are you doing? I'm really good, I was just in Boston last week and I got to spend some time with my niece, Maeve, who is two and a half and oh my god, this kid is such a trip. One morning I was sitting on the couch and she dragged over this little toy piano she has, dragged it over to me, climbed on top and started to play piano with her feet and singing a song to me about the fact that I was in town. I love that little kids are like I don't need to sit in front of a piano and play with my fingers, I'm going to sit on top and play with my toes, so there. Who cares?

I'll tell you, as a life coach, hanging out with a toddler is so instructive because it is the perfect way to witness the unsupervised brain in action. My coach Brooke was the first one to introduce me to this idea, that you need to actively supervise your brain, and that's what we use life coaching tools for. So the brain, when you think about it, it's on the lookout for danger all the time. That's what kept us alive back in the day, seeing danger around every corner was an evolutionary advantage. It prioritizes pleasure and it wants to avoid discomfort because both of these things were linked to survival, and the brain wants to do all of this as efficiently as possible, and that's why our brain loves habits.

But sometimes, these three things - seeking out pleasure, avoiding pain, and forming habits can lead you in a direction that you don't want to go, like drinking too much, right? A direction where you're not getting great results. So you don't like waking up hungover or feeling groggy or having all these empty calories or worrying about what you did or said the night

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before. But no one has ever shown you how or given you the tools to supervise your brain.

So when you try to cut back, it often doesn't work and what will happen is you'll make a little bit of progress, and then you'll have a setback, and you'll find that you'll flip-flop back and forth between the two; back and forth between where you want to go and where you currently are. And most people will do this: they will start to tell themselves that change isn't possible. But it is possible. It's just that no one has ever shown you how to supervise your brain. No one has ever given you these tools.

So I was there in Boston, I was hanging out with Maeve, she's a toddler, she's two and a half, so she cannot supervise her own brain. She needs my sister and my sister-in-law to help her do that, and you know what? She's not all that into being supervised. This weekend she was going around, she had this spray bottle full of water and she was happily spraying everything around the apartment, including the cats, and that's when my sister intervened and said, "Listen Maeve, you can spray anything you want, but you can't spray the cats with water." She was so mad, Maeve was so mad, her little face scrunched up into a scowl and she was not having it. She wanted to spray whatever she wanted to spray, including the cats.

And it got me thinking about how adults act when we are told that we can't do something. So we're adults, we're not toddlers, so we're probably not throwing a tantrum and stomping our feet, but you know, a lot of us are kind of doing that on the inside, right? You guys out there know what I'm talking about. That kind of silent tantrum inside your head when somebody tells you you can't do what you want to do.

So today I'm devoting an entire episode to a single thought, because I see this thought come up again and again with my clients, and it came up for me too when I was first working on changing my drinking. But not only that, not only do I see it come up all the time, but I see how it holds people back and how it keeps people stuck. It did that for me, for a very long time,

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and it made me feel pretty terrible and a little bit like I was having a silent tantrum until I learned to stop thinking it.

So the thought is, "*I just can't drink.*" Have you ever thought this to yourself? Right? Have you ever gotten so sick of the repercussions from drinking too much that you had this thought in the back of your mind? Well, maybe I'm just one of those people who can't drink? I know I did. A lot of people who struggle with their drinking will at some point think this thought, usually after their efforts to reign themselves in doesn't work. They'll think, maybe I'm just someone who can't drink.

And if you have taken breaks in the past, you have probably practiced this thought. "*I can't drink*" over and over and over again to keep yourself in line. I know I used it for an entire year when I was 22 to say no to alcohol. The entire year just telling myself you can't drink, you can't drink, you can't drink. And you know what? I mean, it worked for that year, I didn't drink for a year, but I also felt miserable. I also felt like I was missing out the entire time.

So here's what I want you to know, and for some of you listening, this is going to be kind of controversial. What I want you to know is this: you can drink. You can, you can always make that choice; you and everyone else in the rest of the world. Now, I know a lot of people out there are going to say, yes, that's not really true. My uncle really can't drink, or my co-worker really can't drink. They have a problem. But you know what? You're wrong. Everyone can drink. Every single person out there, and telling yourself that you can't do something, for a lot of people will do more harm than good.

Now, the thought, you can drink, flies in the face of everything you've probably heard about people who struggle with their drinking. Most people think and most of us are taught that the first step to change is to admit that you're powerless, to admit that you can't drink. We've gotten this message over and over and over again in subtle and not so subtle ways, that telling yourself that you can't drink is the only path to start the process of change.

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But I want you to consider for a moment what if this is wrong? What if you don't need to admit to being powerless? What if you don't need to tell yourself that you can't drink? What if telling yourself that you can't do something actually has the opposite effect when it comes to changing your drinking?

We've talked a lot in the past couple episodes about the think-feel-act cycle, but as a reminder if you haven't tuned in before, the cycle is this: all of your actions are driven by how you feel, and all of your feelings are created by what you think. So you never feel an emotion until you think a thought first. You never take an action unless it's driven by a feeling. You think a thought, which creates a feeling, which drives an action. That is the think-feel-act cycle. It's always working in the background of your brain, and most of us are completely unaware of this cycle. We are unconscious to it, so we struggle to understand why we do the things we do and why it is so difficult to change the things we do and to feel better.

So what I want to do is show you how the thought "*I can't drink*" works in the think-feel-act cycle. When you think the thought "*I can't drink*", most of you, not all of you, but most of you likely do not feel a positive emotion. Of course, this is going to be different from person to person, no one sentence in our mind creates a universal feeling for everyone. But most of you, when you think, "*I can't drink*," are not going to feel good. You're probably going to feel bitter or resentful or angry or jealous, powerless, embarrassed, ashamed or wronged.

Now, you know that your feelings drive your actions, so what do you think you do when you feel embarrassed, jealous, bitter, resentful, angry, powerless? How do you act? Now, I'll tell you, maybe you'll silently seethe or complain about your lot in life, maybe you'll obsess about drinking and think about every way in which you're missing out. Maybe you'll fixate on how unfair all of this is and how not drinking makes you different from everybody else in the world. Maybe you'll stick your head in the sand and pretend like nothing is wrong and just keep going about your merry way, and maybe you'll go pour yourself a drink, because at least that way you

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can feel better. At least then you'll have a quick and easy fix to stop feeling bitter, resentful, angry, powerless, embarrassed, ashamed and jealous.

Now, are any of those actions getting you closer to the goal of drinking less? Are any of those actions getting you closer to your goal of feeling better, feeling more in control? I don't think so. And I should know because I did all of this. I told myself that I couldn't drink. I told myself that over and over again, and I will tell you that it was the fastest route for me to feel miserable. But now remember, I - probably you as well, I was drinking to escape how I felt in the first place. I was drinking to escape feeling awkward, feeling insecure, feeling anxious. I already had plenty of negative emotions, and now I was telling myself that I couldn't drink, and that was creating a whole new set of negative emotions for me.

So now on top of the anxiety and insecurity and awkwardness that I had, now I also felt resentful and embarrassed. Can you see what's happening here? You're drinking to get rid of a negative emotion, you're drinking so that you can take the edge off of feeling lonely or bored or anxious, whatever it is for you, and after a while, when you keep turning to a drink to change how you feel, you're going to start to get negative repercussions. Repercussions that you have to deal with. You don't like how you feel the next day, you don't like how you behave, you don't like feeling like something has more control over you than you would like.

So then you decide that the solution is to tell yourself okay, you can't drink anymore. And for most people when they do that, they feel resentful and angry on top of the negative emotions they were already having and already trying to deal with by having a drink. So does this sound like a good idea? No. You're just layering a negative emotion on top of other negative emotions.

Now, let me tell you, if you're someone listening who has told yourself that you can't drink and this thought feels positive and motivating and self-affirming and non-judgmental, then by all means keep on doing what you're doing. Really don't stop if that thought feels good for you. But in my experience, most people who tell themselves that they can't drink more

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often feel miserable and bitter and resentful, and that my friend, is the problem when you think about the cycle. It's a problem when you understand how think-feel-act works.

The truth is this: the truth is you can drink. Once you are of age, you always have the choice to go to the liquor store and buy a bottle of wine, or to order a cocktail at dinner or to open up the fridge and grab a beer. Whatever it is, but that's not really the question. The question is, do you want to drink? Do you want that third glass of wine? Do you want to have another beer when you're out at happy hour?

When I ask this to most people, their immediate reaction is yes, duh, of course, of course I want a drink. Right? And that's what I thought for a long time too. But once I started to go through all the negative results they're getting, feeling like they have no other way to unwind in the evening, waking up the next morning feeling groggy, having disturbed sleep, maybe having weight gain, worrying about what they did or said the night before, then all of a sudden what they want is not so clear cut.

Listen, telling yourself you can't drink is for most people such a negative thought because of what they make not drinking mean about who they are as a person. If I were to tell you, you can't have celery, you probably wouldn't feel a negative emotion, right? No one cares if they can't have celery. If there's someone out there listening who does care, let me know. Right, but no one cares, because we receive very few cultural messages about eating celery. It's just a vegetable; it's not a marker of who we are as a person. But telling yourself you can't drink is caught up in all these cultural and societal message we get about what it means to be a person who does drink. Messages that we've gotten from a very young age when we were not allowed to do it, we were not of the legal age. We get these messages that drinking is adult and it's sophisticated and it's fun, and drinking is normal and it's just what people do. And if you can't drink, then you must not be any of these things, right?

Because on the other hand, we also get messages that not drinking is boring and it's uptight and it's maybe kind of weak if you're not able to drink.

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And if you tell yourself you can't drink, then suddenly you worry that you might become all of these negative things. So do you see yourself by telling yourself you can't drink can be problematic? If you can't drink, it's kind of like telling yourself you can't eat at the adult table.

But you really have to start to consider something different, right? You have to start to consider what it means for you, not for the rest of the world, not for society, not for everybody else. You have to start to consider what drinking means for you, and here's the thing: it can mean nothing. It can. I promise, and I know if you're struggling right now with this, I know it does not feel like that could ever be the case. I was right there with you. Really. But not drinking for me right now is legitimately like not eating celery. It doesn't mean anything. It's not a marker of who I am.

And here's the other thing: I don't ever, ever, ever tell myself that I can't drink. Never. I learned that I had to shift that language. Telling myself that I couldn't drink, that I can't drink was so negative for me, and you know what, it also wasn't the truth. The truth is that I can drink at any time that I want to, but I have thought about this so much and I have considered this so much and I have understood, you know what, it's not that I can't drink, it's that I choose not to. And those thoughts feel so different in my body.

So here's what I want you to consider this week. If you've ever told yourself or if you are telling yourself right now that you can't drink, first, just ask yourself how does that thought feel? Does it produce a positive or a negative emotion? And is the emotion its producing - is it getting you closer to your goal of changing your drinking? So that's the first thing.

Then I want you to consider the thought you can drink, because the truth is, you can always choose to drink. Always. But the thing is, maybe you want to decide to choose something else. Maybe you want to choose not to drink, and when you think this thought, I can drink, but I'm choosing not to, I can have another glass of wine, but I'm choosing not to, as opposed to I can't, or I shouldn't, how does that thought feel for you? I can drink, but I'm choosing not to. I can have another, but I'm choosing not to.

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Pay attention to this. It may seem like such a small subtle change, but when you understand the think-feel-act cycle, when you understand that every thought you think creates an emotion and those emotions drive what you do, you will realize that there is no such thing as an insignificant thought. You have to pay attention to what you are telling yourself. You have to pay attention to how it makes you feel, and more importantly, you have to start to notice if the actions that you're taking are putting you in the direction that you want to go, or if you keep being stuck in this world of flip-flopping back and forth.

So pay attention this week, ask yourself these questions. Ask yourself how these two very similar thoughts, but distinctly different, how I can't drink and how I can drink, but I'm choosing not to, how they feel. How do they work in your own individual think-feel-act cycle?

Alright, so that's it for today, I love hearing from you guys, I've been hearing from so many of you. Keeping sending the emails in, it's podcast@rachelhart.com and thanks for listening. I'll see you next week.

Thanks for listening to this episode of *Take a Break from Drinking*. If you like what was offered in today's show and want more, please come over to www.rachelhart.com where you can sign up for weekly updates to learn more about the tools that will help you take a break.