

## Ep #51: Why Alcohol and Food Aren't Your Friends



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**Rachel Hart**

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You are listening to the *Take a Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, episode 51. 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.

Hey everybody, how was your holiday? I'm back. I'm back in San Francisco, and I have to tell you, my holiday was so good. I was in Connecticut with my family and we had a real white Christmas, truly. I woke up Christmas morning and I looked outside and it was snowing, and everything was blanketed in white, and the world was so peaceful and still and it was like I immediately turned into a six-year-old and I shook my husband awake to tell him. Like, "Honey, we have a white Christmas. It's a white Christmas", and he was like, "Okay, great, I'll look outside later."

But I was very happy, I loved it. I got to see my parents and my grandmother and then we went up to Boston and I saw my sister and her wife and their little girl Maive, and they just had a little boy Calvin, who I met for the first time. So it was a great holiday. But I'll tell you, before we were in New England, we actually spent a week in New York City, which I loved because you know, it's my old hometown and I have so many people there that I love and I miss. And so, I tried to cram in seeing as many of my friends as possible.

Now, one of these people, one of my friends is a woman named Suzie, and I will tell you, she is the very first friend that I made when I moved to New York City after college. We actually met at work and it was one of those things where something just clicked. We became friends right away and for a couple years in our mid-20s Suzie and I actually lived just a block away from each other in Brooklyn, which you know, in your 20s in Brooklyn, you know, it was great to have your best friend right around the corner from you.

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So I'll tell you, Suzie is also one of those friends who has seen me at my best but also my worst. She was there all throughout my 20s when I was getting drunk, I was being really reckless, I was making stupid decisions, and you know what, I actually think it's really good to have people like that in your life. Sometimes we go through a really big transformation, like deciding we want to take a break from drinking and just really change the decisions that we're making, and it's so easy to fall into the trap of wanting to wipe the slate clean and pretend that all that messy stuff before, that didn't exist. But you know, I think it's really important to have people who know the whole you, right? All the messes, they know everything. Because all of us, we're all a mix of both. We are a mix of the dark and the light. And so, having someone that fully knows that and sees the real, authentic you, I just don't think that there's really anything better than that.

So I'm telling you about Suzie because last year we made a New Year's resolution together. We decided that we would start sending each other post cards in the mail. So despite how close we are, you know, as we grew up, our lives started to take different directions, and so staying in touch became more and more difficult especially once I moved all the way across the country. And you know, you have those moments, and I'm sure a lot of you can relate, where you just think, "I really need to pick up the phone. I really need to catch up with this friend" or, "I just have to write an email. I really need to send an email." But so much has happened, right? Where do I even begin? How do I even do a proper update?

And we were both feeling this way so we settled on sending post cards. Now listen, I love sending post cards, but more importantly, I love getting post cards. I love walking downstairs, checking the mail, and seeing something that's just for me, that's not a bill, it's not a solicitation, right? Getting an unexpected note from someone that you love is wonderful. I have a little burst of joy every time I go down and check the mail and see a post card from Suzie.

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So she kicked off last year with the first post card, and then when I would receive one from her, I would sit down a couple days later and write one back. And we probably exchanged one or two post card every month for all of 2017. And I'll tell you, if you want to do this, if you plan ahead, it is super easy to do. You can buy these boxes of 50 or 100 post cards on Amazon so that you always have one at the ready, you don't have to go looking and hunting and searching for a post card, and then all you need to do is have a couple books of stamps on hand. And it's so simple once you have the supplies at your fingertips. And really, a post card, the space on it, it's pretty small, so it's not that daunting to fill out a little blurb about what's happening in your life. But it brings so much pleasure to the person that you send it to.

So why am I telling you all about post cards other than I think everyone should send post cards? Because I want to talk to you today about what makes for a good friend. I've had a couple people that I've been working with recently who are working on trying to take a break from drinking, and saying that you know, saying no to alcohol, saying no to a drink is like losing a good friend. And the first time that I heard that, I was like, "Wow, hold on here. Let's not just accept this thought at face value, the idea that alcohol is a good friend and that taking a break is like losing that friend. Let's really question this." And I'll tell you this, for those of my listeners who are also working on stopping overeating, what I'm going to be talking about today, you can apply all of these concepts to food as well. And in fact, I think it's incredibly common that people often tell themselves that a drink or a bowl of ice cream is like a friend.

So first, let's talk about what a friend is. What is a friend? A friend is simply a person whom you know and with whom you have a bond of mutual affection. I really want you to pay attention to one word in there that's very important. Mutual. Mutual affection. The bond of mutual affection goes two ways, right? Think about the post cards that I exchanged with Suzie. We are both exchanging them. The bond of affection we have for each other is mutual.

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Now, when you tell yourself that alcohol or food is your friend, you're telling yourself, "Well, you know, it never lets me down, and it comforts me and it's always there for me at the end of a long day", but here's the truth. Neither alcohol nor food care one iota about you. They are terrible friends. There is no bond of mutual affection. Now, you may have affection for alcohol and food, but they don't have any affection for you. They just sit there. They are inanimate. If somebody else walked by, someone came over to you and picked up your glass of wine or grabbed that bag of chips out of your hand, and ate it before you could, the wine and the chips would not protest. They wouldn't care. They are just sitting there waiting to be consumed by anyone. You just happen to be the person consuming them.

So really think about that. Alcohol and food do not care about you at all. They just sit there. So why is it then that we trick ourselves into believing that alcohol and food are our friends? I think that there are actually a couple reasons why we do this. Now, the first is because we so often turn to a drink or turn to food for comfort. So when you're experiencing a negative emotion and that can be stress or anxiety, insecurity, loneliness, boredom, frustration, whatever it is, when you are experiencing a negative emotion, you get into the habit of turning to a drink or turning to something to eat as a way to feel better, right?

And it becomes a habit without even really realizing it. I mean, I will tell you that I had no idea that I was really doing this when this habit started for me. And the habit started especially with food, I mean, that habit started for me probably when I was 10 or 11. That's when that habit really started for me. With drinking it started when I was 17. But I got into the habit of turning to alcohol and food as a way to change how I was feeling, because of course, you can drink something or eat something and it will give you an influx of dopamine and momentarily change how you feel. It also pulls energy away from your nervous system. Your nervous system is where you're experiencing the emotions, but all of a sudden, your body has to turn to digestion, it has to turn to removing alcohol, dealing with that. And so, it's a way to numb how we feel.

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Of course, you know if you've been listening to the podcast, this is not a sustainable solution, right? Turning to alcohol and food over and over and over again does two things. One, it just makes you more dependent on having a drink or eating something as a way to deal with a negative emotion, and because it is numbing you, it is just covering up how you're feeling, you're never able to look at the root cause of what's going on. And of course, the root cause of any negative emotion, if you remember the think-feel-act cycle, is always what you're thinking.

So that's the first reason. We fool ourselves into believing that alcohol and food are our friends because we so often turn to alcohol and food for comfort. But there is another reason why this happens, and I think this one is really important. The reason why we start to believe alcohol and food are our friends is because turning to alcohol and food requires zero vulnerability. Now, I know a lot of you out there, when you hear the word 'vulnerability', you think that it means weakness. But vulnerability really isn't about weakness. Vulnerability is that moment when you are experiencing risk, you are experiencing uncertainty, you are experiencing exposure, right? That's the moment of vulnerability. It's not about weakness.

It's the moment when you reach out and say, "I really need a hug right now", "I really need a shoulder to cry on", "I just need someone to listen to the day that I had", "I just need a space where I can be 100% myself, and honest and truthful about what I'm going through." Those are moments when you are experiencing vulnerability, when you ask for something from someone. And the reason why this is a vulnerable moment is because you don't know if they're going to say yes. You're putting yourself out there. You're asking for something that you don't know you will get in return. You're also saying, "Hey, I'm feeling really negative right now, I'm having a lot of negative emotions", you're exposing a part of yourself.

When you ask for a friend, it requires that you are okay with being vulnerable. But when you instead of asking for support from a friend, turn to something to drink or something to eat, you don't have to risk any vulnerability. There's no uncertainty. There's no exposure. There's no risk

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when you pour yourself a glass of wine or you reach into the fridge and grab some food. You get to bypass vulnerability.

So these are the two reasons why I think we really fool ourselves and we trick our brains into believing that alcohol and food are our friends, because we so often turn to both of them for comfort, so we get into this habit of using them to deal with our negative emotions. And because it's so easy to do, it doesn't require any vulnerability. It doesn't require any risk, doesn't risk any uncertainty, any exposure. Food and alcohol are never going to say no. They're never going to say, "No, you can't eat me", "No, you can't drink me", right? They're just there for the taking, they're waiting to be consumed.

So what's happening is that you're fooling yourself into believing that what you have is a friend, when in reality what you have is a substance that will help you numb how you feel and give your brain an influx of dopamine. And now, you've heard me talk a lot about how alcohol will give your brain an influx of dopamine, but the same is true for certain kinds of food. Generally, these are foods that provide our brain with a big reward, right? They're very processed, they may be very sugary.

So I want you to think about this with food. No one has ever said to my knowledge, "Listen, cabbage is just my friend. I feel like if I'm not eating cabbage I'm losing a friend", right? Nobody says that with cabbage because cabbage isn't giving your brain an influx of dopamine. You're not getting a big reward. When we're talking about how food is a friend, we're often talking about chocolate, and ice cream, things that are high in fat, high in sugar. Those are the ones that people talk about. "Food is my friend."

So that's why it's so easy to fool yourselves into believing that alcohol and food are your friends, when really, they are not. They just sit there, they are just waiting to be consumed. They do not care about you. But the next question for you to consider is this. If the qualities of numbing how you feel and requiring zero risk, zero uncertainty, zero exposure are not the signs of friendship, then what are the signs of friendship? I've talked about

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this bond of mutual affection, but there is more to that. What are the kind of qualities that make for a friend other than that bond of mutual affection?

So I think that there are five qualities. Now, I'm going to ask you a little bit later for you to come up with your own list. So you may have more to add or ones that you would change, but these are the five qualities that I think are really important in a friend. So a friend will push you to be kinder to yourself. Now, this one is so huge. You hear me talk about all the time how your self-talk, your internal dialogue is so important. That is one of the cornerstones of understanding the think-feel-act cycle. You have to understand and you have to be aware of the thoughts that you are thinking about yourself all day long.

So when I work with people to do this work and they start to notice the language that they use to talk to themselves, usually, they realize very quickly that they would never ever use the same language with a friend. They would never say, "You're such a screw up. You're a failure. You're not good enough. You're ugly. You're worthless. You're lazy." This is so important. Think about the language that a friend uses with you. They are using language that is all about kindness and compassion and acceptance, right? And so, when we see a friend modeling that language, it helps us see that we can change how we talk to ourselves. So in a way, a good friend really pushes us to be kinder to ourselves.

Alcohol and food cannot do these things. They cannot teach you how to be kinder or more compassionate or more accepting. The only thing that they can teach you is how to hide, how to cover up how you feel, how to zone out, how to tune out, how to go unconscious. That's the only thing that alcohol and food can teach you.

Second, friends will call you out when you're in the wrong. They're not scared to tell you the truth, no matter how difficult it may be. You know, I actually think about this one a lot. The people in my life and there aren't really that many of them who I can count on to say, "Rachel, you've really got this wrong. You're not correct. You're making a mistake here." Those people, they're really few and far between, and I really treasure that. That's

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a really important quality, I think, to have in a friend. And I also think back, you know, in all of the time, from 17 onwards, when I was trying to figure out my drinking and struggling with it, and just so frustrated, I only ever had one friend pull me aside and say, "You know what, I'm kind of worried about you." I really only ever had one.

And I think about that and I don't think that's because I didn't have a lot of people who cared about me. Actually, I think it was the opposite. I think I had a lot of people who cared about me, but I do think about how scary and difficult it must have been for that friend to really tell me the truth. But it was so important for me to hear, it really was an incredibly difficult thing to hear but a really important thing to have another person say, "You know, I'm kind of worried about you. I'm worried about what you're doing." So friends call us out. They're not scared to tell us the truth, even when it's difficult.

The third quality, friends support us through adversity because they are able to be fully present, and they are really listening. Now, think about this one. To be truly present, and to really listen to someone else, you have to be conscious. You have to be fully there. You cannot be zoned out. You cannot be buzzed. You have to be fully in yourself. And of course, drinking makes you go unconscious. When you're thinking, "I feel like I'm losing my friend if I take a break from drinking", drinking is not - alcohol is not helping you be fully present. It is not listening to you. All it is doing is making you go unconscious. It is tuning you out. It is tuning out how you feel, it is tuning out your thinking, it's doing the opposite of tuning in.

And I think that really when you consider what is needed, what kind of support you need when you are going through adversity, it is the ability for someone to be present with you. You know, they don't have to fix it, they don't have to solve it. They just need to be there with you. They just need to be able to really listen. So that's the third quality.

The fourth quality is that a friend really accepts the other just as they are, without any conditions. And because of this, you're able to feel comfortable with them the same way that you can feel comfortable by

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yourself. This one's so important. I think of my friend Suzie, and she's really such a perfect example. We are so comfortable with each other that there's no pretense. We can just pick up right where we left off, even if we haven't seen each other in maybe even a year. We're just able to pick up because there's no pretense. We accept each other as we are. We don't have conditions on how each other should be acting. We just accept each other fully. Again, alcohol and food, they're not accepting you. They can't accept you, they can't do anything. They can just sit there. That's all they do.

And then finally, the fifth quality is that a friend really shows you how to be a better person, they help you grow. And I think that the reason why this happens is because they are making space for compassion and kindness and acceptance. They are making space for you to be imperfect, for you to make mistakes. And if you can show up as your real, authentic self, flaws and all, mistakes and all, imperfections and all, in front of one person, it helps you practice showing up that way more often.

So these are the five qualities that I really think about when I think of what I'm looking for in a friend. Kindness, truth telling, being present, acceptance, and growth. So consider those, and then consider how you show up when you are drinking to numb how you feel, or when you're just drinking more than you want. Or how you are showing up when you're eating way more than you want, or the things that you don't want to be eating.

I'll tell you how I show up in those moments. I show up disconnected from my body, disconnected from my emotions, and from my consciousness. I am less conscious of my surroundings and my social cues, so I think a lot about how when I was drinking, I was really loud. I thought I was really funny, much funnier than I really was, and when I was overeating, I was just zoning out. I was spacing out. I wasn't connecting to my surroundings, I wasn't connecting to what was happening around me. I was trying to go to a place of unconsciousness.

I also think that you know, especially when I was drinking, how I was showing up in those moments, I was blabbing secrets, I was saying things

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the next day that I wish I could take back. I would write emails or send text messages that I would think about in the morning and just wonder what ever came over me. I was slurring, I was stumbling, I was repeating myself. And then often I was feeling physically sick. And that might be that kind of immediate post-wine headache that sometimes I used to get, or waking up in the middle of the night with a sour stomach, or waking up the next morning feeling so hungover. And you know, the same is true when you think about the physical side effects for food. I think when I'm eating my friend - such a weird thing to say - but I would often end up uncomfortably full, really feeling kind of physically sick.

So this is how I was showing up when I was thinking, "Alcohol and food, they're my friends." I got to tell you, if that's the way you show up, that's a really crappy friend. They don't have any of those five qualities that I talked about. There's no mutual bond of affection. There is just me wanting to tune out, me wanting to disconnect. So think about this for yourself. How are you showing up when you are drinking more than you want? When you are eating more than you want? When you are using both alcohol and food as a way to change how you feel, a way to comfort yourself, a way to trick your brain into thinking that it's getting support when in reality all you're doing is not having to have any vulnerability. You're not having to risk anything or be uncertain or wonder if the drink or the bag of chips is going to say no, because of course it'll never say anything.

So here's what I want you to consider this week. If taking a break from drinking feels like you're losing a friend, then I want you to ask yourself if what you're really in need of is an actual friend. Now, that may mean an actual other person, or it may mean starting to learn how to be a friend to yourself. And a big place to start is paying attention to that self-talk, paying attention to your internal dialogue, how you talk about yourself, how you talk about whatever you're struggling with, and paying attention to whether or not that is the language you would ever expect a friend to use with you, or the language you would use with a friend.

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So you know, if you discover that, "Actually, I might be just in need of an actual friend", you can start by making a list of people that you might reach out to. And it doesn't have to be reaching out and saying, "Hey, I'm thinking about taking a break from drinking." It just can be reaching out when you're feeling a negative emotion, when you're feeling stressed. It can be as simple as a text message. So you can start there, or you can really start by considering your self-talk, considering how a friend would talk to you about what you're struggling with right now. Would they tell you, "You know, you're kind of a screw up. Pretty broken, worthless, lazy, undisciplined, hopeless"? Or would they be offering compassion and kindness?

If you aren't ready to reach out to another person, you can at least start practicing talking to yourself like a friend. And I want you to also ask yourself what you want in a friendship. This can be a friendship with another person, or it can be a friendship with yourself, because yes, you can have a friendship with yourself. You can have affection for yourself. I've given you a list of qualities to consider, but put together your own list. What's important to you? What do you think is worthwhile or important when it comes to a friendship? And then ask yourself, "Is a drink or food giving me any of these things?" I want you to really, really consider this one, because I will tell you this. Alcohol and food don't care about you. You may care about them, but there is no mutual bond of affection. The affection only goes one way. They're just sitting there waiting to be consumed.

Alright, that's all for today. As always, if you have any questions, if you'd like to hear me talk about a specific topic on the podcast, you can always send me an email at [podcast@rachelhart.com](mailto:podcast@rachelhart.com). Otherwise, I will see everyone next week.

Hey guys, if you want to go over to iTunes and leave a review about the podcast if you're enjoying it, I would love it. But not only that; I am giving everyone who does a free urge meditation. I will tell you, this meditation, it is super simple. All it takes is five minutes and a pair of

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headphones. If you are having an urge and you want a different way to handle it, just pop those headphones in, find a place where you can sit down undisturbed and teach your brain, retrain your brain a very simple method to make urges more tolerable. All you need to do is head on over to [rachelhart.com/urge](http://rachelhart.com/urge) and input your information there.

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