

## Ep #76: Drinking and Your To-Do List



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**Rachel Hart**

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You are listening to the *Take A Break* podcast, episode 76. Welcome to the *Take A Break* podcast with Rachel Hart. If you are 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. We are talking about to-do lists today. To-do list, do you have one? Do you have multiple ones? Do you have a really, really, really long one? I was talking to a client recently who said his list was almost 27 pages. That is a long list. And I will tell you, I for a long time in my life have been kind of a queen of multiple, multiple to-do lists, and I have really had to look and examine my thinking around them and understand whether or not all these lists that I keep are so helpful. And I'll tell you what I found a lot of times is that they were working against me.

So we're going to talk about that today, but of course, we're going to talk about how this connects with alcohol. Who would have ever thought this? Alcohol and to-do lists, how are they connected? But they are.

I see this issue come up with so many of my clients. Using a drink as a way to cope with your to-do list. Now listen, it happens in two pretty distinct ways. The first is using a drink as a way to rest by quieting that internal critic in your mind and giving yourself permission to kick back and to relax. So when you're go, go, go, go, go, and you're just so exhausted, and then finally it's when you have that glass of wine that then you give yourself permission to acknowledge that you're tired, acknowledge that maybe you just need to sit back. So that's one way.

But there's another way too. And that second way is using a drink and the initial stimulating effects of a buzz as a way to keep going, a way to keep pushing through the list, especially pushing through at the end of the day, maybe on things that you are not so excited to be doing.

So I see this happen all the time, and let me tell you, if you feel a little confused right now, it makes sense, right? Because what I'm describing are two kinds of opposite effects here. But think about it. Alcohol has both a

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stimulating and a sedative effect on the brain. It really depends, one, on how much you're drinking, and two, your kind of personal reaction to it.

So think of it this way: think of that kind of initial buzz that a lot of people get when they drink. So they talk about being chattier and more gregarious, louder, quicker to laugh, right? That is the stimulating effect. But then compare that to how you might feel after a couple drinks. You might feel really relaxed or a little sleepy.

I mean, if you watch people who've had a lot to drink, not only can you really start to see it, but you can hear it, right? Their speech is kind of slurred and their eyelids are heavy, and that's the sedative effect that alcohol can have on the brain.

Now listen, keep in mind that alcohol affects everyone in different ways. So I think I've mentioned this on the podcast before. My dad is one of those guys who you give him a beer and he immediately is sleepy. And you might be someone who finds that it gives you more energy, you might be someone who finds that it makes you sleepy at first, but I want you to just consider for the purpose of this the idea that alcohol has both a stimulant and a sedative or depressant effect on the brain and that your brain may have unconsciously learned to use these differing effects to cope with your to-do list and to get through the day.

But before we dive into how alcohol connects with learning to cope with your to-do list, I want to talk about the list itself. And I want you to first think about how you generally regard your to-do list. Is it long? Is it short? Is it growing? It is never-ending? How much time do you spend thinking about it during the day? How much time do you think about what you have to get done? How often are you thinking, "I don't have enough time to get it all done?"

And when you think about how you regard this list, I want you to consider, well, what is the ultimate goal of a to-do list? And most people will say, "I want to finish it." Right? "I want to complete it, I want to get it all done." Or I'll hear a lot, "I just want to get ahead. I just want to feel like I'm not behind

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because I always feel like I'm so behind. And if I can finally get ahead, then I will feel better."

So what most of you are doing, you're attributing feeling any kind of overwhelm or stress or anxiety to the list itself and how long it is and how much progress you've made crossing things off rather than what we know creates your overwhelm and your stress and your anxiety and any emotion for that matter, which is your thoughts. How you are thinking about the list and what's on it. And that is a big shift for a lot of you.

One of the things I actually have people do, especially when they come to me and they are freaking out about their list and telling me, "I have so much to do, there's so much on my plate, I'm totally swamped, I'm totally overwhelmed by everything I have to get done, I have a million things on here," is I ask them to get as factual as possible.

So I talk about this a lot with the think-feel-act cycle. It's really important to be able to separate out the facts, the neutral facts of our life from our opinion and our judgment and our interpretation of those facts, right? You want to separate out the circumstances, which are the facts, and your thoughts, which is all your opinion and judgment.

So the first thing I ask people to do is I say, tell me what's on it. You got a million things, like, go for it, let's write it down. So you know, really write out the list and count it up. Because a lot of times what happens is I'm so swamped, I'm so overwhelmed, I have a million things to do turns into 17 things.

Now, you can have opinions about whether or not 17 is a lot or a little, but it definitely isn't a million. We can agree on that. So from there, once they have the list itself, I ask them, alright, so let's see if we can separate this into what I must accomplish, what is a non-negotiable versus what I want to do, what I want to accomplish. And of course, reminding you that almost nothing in life is a must get done. Most things are actually wants because we're humans and we have free will.

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But starting to split your musts and your wants into two different categories is a really good starting place because you can start to see, well, alright, I must turn in this form to the doctor before my next visit if I want to get insurance coverage, versus I really want to clean out my closet, right? Starting to really look at the things on your list and see what is truly a non-negotiable.

And then finally, I always ask people to put dates on the list. What is the deadline? So many of you have these never-ending to-do lists with no dates attached to them. But that deadline piece is really important. It's really important for you to understand how many things on your list are things that you would like to do, you would like to get around to, at some point in the future you'd like to tackle, but they don't actually have to be done today.

And in fact, how many of the things on your to-do list don't even have hard and fast deadlines at all? Because really, just getting as factual as possible about the list is how you can start to shift your thinking, right? Because all of a sudden, you can go from I'm swamped, I'm totally overwhelmed, my list is never-ending, I have so much to do, I'm never going to get out from under this to there are three tasks that have deadlines for today.

Those are totally different thoughts. And so being really factual this way can be really helpful. But beyond getting really factual, the second thing to ask yourself is how do you regard a to-do list in general? When should you be done? When should you be caught up? When should you have nothing left to do?

And I know when I considered this question for the very first time, it was kind of confusing for my brain because I was so sure, I was always telling myself, I'm so behind, I'm so behind, I'm so behind, but here's the thing; if you're behind, then of course there is a place when you are ahead or caught up.

We see our to-do list as if it is something that has an end point, and I want you to really question whether or not it's true. Because when are you really

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truly not going to have anything left to accomplish in life? When will that be? You know, when you think about it, you realize, oh, that's when I'm no longer here.

And that is a really important distinction to understand. Your list is not supposed to be empty because you're alive and people who are alive are supposed to be living, they're supposed to be doing, they're supposed to be accomplishing things. That is the whole point of existing. We don't exist here just to sit. We exist to do and to create.

But so often when we're caught up in this idea that I'm always behind, I just got to get to the end of it, what we're seeing is this mythical end point in future that doesn't exist. And so I think instead of seeing your to-do list as a list, you can see it as a river. A river of to-dos. Because with a list, there's an end point, but with a river, it just flows.

You know, one of the reasons why I like this analogy so much is I grew up in Connecticut right next to a river. I mean, our backyard ran right into the river, which made for very interesting sledding outings when I was a child. But I really love the analogy of a river because whenever I go home to visit my parents, almost always one of the first things I comment on is the state of the river. Is it high? Is it fast? It looks so calm, it's moving so slowly.

Because you know, the river is always moving, just how it moves changes. It's always flowing. And I think it's really helpful to see work and errands and things that you want to accomplish in the same way. They are always flowing in and out of your life. Life is about doing things. Some of those things are really extraordinary, but some of those things are also kind of mundane.

And you're never going to reach a state where you're all caught up and all the work is done and everything is crossed off your to-do list because that river of to-dos keeps flowing as long as you're alive. It makes so much more sense for me to think of this list instead of a list as a river.

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So you're not trying to finish it. You're just choosing when to step in and out of it. You're not racing to the end, you're not trying to dry it all up. You're just deciding that sometimes you're going to wade into it. But you can also wade out of it. But that river is going to keep flowing.

You know, this way when you think about it, you're never ahead, you're never behind. You're right exactly where you're supposed to be. The existence of a river of to-dos is not a problem. The only problem is when you tell yourself that everything should already be done or that you're behind or that you're never going to get caught up or that that river is totally overwhelming you. It's supposed to be flowing, it's supposed to always exist.

So once you have really considered how you regard your to-do list, and I think that this piece is incredibly important. Then you want to see, well, does it connect to my drinking at all? Because I watch this happen for so many of my clients, and here is how it plays out.

So the first is you're so overwhelmed by everything on your list and everything that has to get done and always feelings behind and never being able to shut off your brain about what you should be doing, that pouring a drink becomes permission to rest. It becomes me time where you don't have to do anything on your list, you don't have to meet anybody else's needs, you can just sit back and relax.

And I talk about this a lot with clients because here's the thing: what if you just decided it was okay to rest? What if you decided it was okay to sit down? To just sit on your couch and not do anything? Could you feel good?

Most people will say, "Well, no. The only way that I know how to do that, the only way I know how not to be going all the time is if I pour myself a glass of wine. Otherwise, I can't just sit down. If I'm sitting there and I'm doing nothing, what I'm doing or what my brain is doing is telling me that I should be productive, I should be working."

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Well, why? Why is that? Because of course, they are also believing that the only way to feel better is to get caught up, to get ahead of the list, which is now something you know that is impossible because there's that river and it's always flowing, always with things to do and things to accomplish.

So here's what happens. When you sit on the couch at the end of the day without something in your hand to drink, you have to listen to your brain and all the automatic thoughts about how you're not doing enough, there's still so much to get done, you're behind, you're swamped, and this is a perfect example of alcohol's ability to quiet your internal critic.

Alcohol depresses the part of your brain, the prefrontal cortex where thought processing and consciousness is centered. So basically, it is able to quiet your inner critic, it is able to turn the volume down on all these negative thoughts that you have about sitting and resting and relaxing and not being productive, oh, and that pesky to-do list of yours.

And so your options are well, keep drinking to quiet all those thoughts, or learn to challenge what you're thinking about your to-do list. Learn to challenge what you're thinking about your own productivity and whether or not it's okay for you to ever relax.

Because here's the thing: if you keep drinking in order to deal with those thoughts, it's going to cause negative consequences for you. But if you learn how to challenge your thinking, well, not so much. It will take more work than pouring a glass of wine, but the effects, the long-lasting effects are so much more sustainable.

And I always say to people, you know, if it's okay for the people that you love in your life, if it's okay for them to rest and it's okay for them not to be go, go, go, do, do, do all the time, then why isn't that okay for you? Most people will tell me, "Oh, well I just hold myself to a different standard."

But what they don't realize is that the reason they are holding themselves to this standard is because they also have thoughts, these unconscious beliefs about their to-do list that are playing out at the same time. And that

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real underlying thought is I'll feel better when I'm caught up and it's all done.

And so unless they can change that thought, the only way they know how to relax is to use something that turns down the volume on their internal critic. So this is the first way that people use alcohol to escape their to-do list and to give themselves permission to kick back and relax. Permission that frankly, I believe all of us have. We don't need to have a drink in order to do it. And the downside is that you never teach your brain that it's okay to rest. You never teach your brain that the reason you feel anxious and overwhelmed and stressed out when you think about your list is not because of the list itself, but everything you're thinking about it.

But there is a second way that alcohol connects to your to-do list and that is using the stimulating effects of a drink. So what will happen is that alcohol may give you the energy to do things that you don't want to do. That's where the stimulating effects of alcohol kicks in. I don't want to make dinner, but I have to. Well, I guess a glass of wine will help me get through it. I don't want to help the kids with homework, but I have to. Well, I guess a drink will make that more tolerable. I'm too tired to do the laundry or walk the dog or pick up after people, but if I have a drink, that will help keep me pushing, keep me going.

I was having this exchange with a client recently and she said, you know, it really bothers her to leave anything undone. She just couldn't shut her brain down until she was satisfied that she had completed everything that needs to be done. And so having a drink at the end of the day was a way to keep pushing, to keep going, when really all she wanted to do was rest, but she kept telling herself I can't rest because I'm so bothered when things are left undone.

The thing that I showed her was that when something is undone, and whatever it is, whatever it is in your world that has not yet been completed, that is a neutral circumstance. Something that is undone does not make you feel a negative emotion until you have a negative thought about it. Undone things do not automatically bother you. They're just sitting there

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being undone. They aren't taunting you. What's taunting you are all the thoughts that you have, all the negative emotions you're creating about the fact that something has not yet been finished. It is what you make it mean about yourself if you leave something undone.

And so what happens? So, well, I'll just keep going. I'll get a little bit of buzz from a drink to keep pushing through. But the truth is this: no human can sprint endlessly. I don't care if you're Usain Bolt. The body must have a fixed period of rest and recovery. But so many of you see the physical state of being tired as a problem that has to be solved rather than a physical state that needs to be acknowledged.

You are supposed to be tired sometimes. Being tired is part of being human. But for a lot of you, being tired is what is getting in the way of everything done. And you think, if I get everything done then I'll feel better, but I'm tired, so what do I do? Oh, I'll have a glass of wine, I'll have a beer, and then I'll get a little bit more energy and I can just keep pushing.

But here's the thing: it is incredibly difficult to give yourself space to relax if you are always judging the fact that you are tired and seeing it as something negative. You know, a lot of people will have this thought, "Well, if I don't get it done, I'll be letting everybody down." There's so much judgment in there.

So instead of just acknowledging that you're tired, a lot of people will turn to a drink and use the stimulating effects to keep going, to keep pushing, to keep working, to keep barreling through the list. And you can see how soon enough, you will be stuck in a pretty vicious cycle.

Because if it's not acceptable to rest or to be tired unless everything is done, and then you turn to a drink to fix that "problem," the problem of being tired to give you energy so that you can keep going, and the reason that you're doing that is because you believe that once you get everything done, then you will feel better, well, guess how that's going to turn out.

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You're going to continually be telling yourself it's not okay to rest, the only way I can feel better is if I get everything done, so now I need to find something to give me the energy. Oh, I know, I'll have a drink. And that drink will give you a little bit of energy, but guess what will happen on the next day, right? You turn to a drink every night, one or two or three, whatever the number is, and then suddenly you're waking up and you're having negative consequences, which guess what, then affects your ability to get things done and be productive. It's a pretty vicious cycle.

But really, there is no ahead and there is no behind when it comes to your to-do list. You can't get to the end of it because you're alive. And work and to-dos and things to accomplish are just going to keep flowing. They are part of that river.

So I want you to notice today whether or not you fall into one or both of these camps. I see a lot of people who actually fall into both. Sometimes they use alcohol as a way to rest and give themselves permission to relax because otherwise, if they were just sitting on the couch without that drink in their hand, they'd have to listen to all their negative thoughts about the fact that they aren't doing things.

Or are you using alcohol as a way to keep going, to keep pushing through, to keep giving yourself a little bit of energy to make things that you're doing more tolerable? Which guess what, all the things that you don't like doing, well, we can look at the thoughts around that as well. We can start to understand why they're not so tolerable.

But here's what you really need to remember. You can either change your perception of the to-dos in your life, you can either move that perception from a list to a river so that you can start not needing alcohol as a way to cope, to cope with being tired, to cope with this belief that you'll finally feel better when everything is done or when you are all caught up, or you can start to apply the think-feel-act cycle and really understand what is behind this.

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And so if you want to start to change this, there are a couple questions that you can ask yourself. One, can you practice allowing yourself to feel tired without judging it? Just notice it as a physical state. It's not getting in the way of your happiness. Can you allow yourself to feel tired and acknowledge it and not try to change it?

Two, can you start to shift your perception of the things that you want to accomplish, your to-dos, your errands, your tasks? Whatever it is, from a list that you're trying to finish, to a river that is always flowing and you can just choose to step in and out of it. But it's going to keep flowing as long as you're here. So you can't get ahead or behind. You can just be in it or not in it.

And then three, can you get really factual about your list? Listen to how you talk about it. What is that self-talk? Ugh, it's a million things, totally swamped, I'm totally overwhelmed, I'm never going to get through it, you should see how long it is. Instead of this overwhelming, all-encompassing list, what's really on it? And what has an actual deadline of today? What is something that truly needs to be accomplished today? Rather than how most of you create this to-do list, which is just one long list of items but not really putting any attention or being really deliberate with deadlines. Can you see if you can focus your attention on that?

So consider how you may be using alcohol as a way to give yourself permission to rest or as a way to push through and keep going. And really ask yourself, is this sustainable or do I need to start looking at all my thoughts around my to-do list? All my thoughts about what I'm telling myself has to get done. Because if you can start to change that, then I promise you will not be looking for relief in the same way.

Alright, that's it for this week. I will see you guys next week. And of course, if you have any questions, you can always email me at [podcast@rachelhart.com](mailto:podcast@rachelhart.com).

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

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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 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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