

Ep #159: Drinking + Awkwardness



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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 159.

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 guys, we are talking about awkwardness today. I'm going to tell you, this is one of those emotions that I personally have had to do a lot of work around, not just connected to the habit that I developed around drinking, but also connected to being a business owner, being a coach and showing up in the world and having a podcast and promoting a book and all of the things where I show up and be vulnerable, I've had to do a lot of work around changing my relationship with awkwardness, and that's what I want to help you guys do today as well.

Because you know what, it stands in the way. It's such an obstacle for so many of you out there, and an obstacle in a huge way because it prevents you from putting yourself out there and it prevents you from showing up big in the world. So instead what do you do? We play small.

And I want to help you not only understand how awkwardness can be connected to the habit of drinking, and PS, connected to so many other habits as well, but how it really is something that unless you do the work around, it is going to prevent you from really tapping into your full potential.

So I'll tell you, I was doing research for this episode and every time I typed awkward into Google, I spelled it incorrectly. Every time. And I love that even the word awkward is somehow a little awkward to spell. You know, awkwardness really is just that sense of not feeling at ease with yourself or at ease with what is happening around you.

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And it is very, very connected to so many habits. Now, people develop habits around drinking for all sorts of reasons. Sometimes it's about getting home from work and needing to relax or needing to create me time, sometimes it's about feeling like you need a little help loosening up in social situations. It can be about wanting to escape your to-do list or just wanting to have a little fun after a week that felt very stressful.

And sometimes the habit of drinking can be about wanting what you want when you want it and not feeling any restriction or any deprivation. So the habit itself can come about in so many different ways, and you might identify more strongly with one of these reasons that I listed than another. You might have a totally separate reason for why drinking has become a habit for you.

Or you might identify with all of these things. I know that I sure did. But what I want you to really understand today is that even if you do not connect awkwardness with the habit of drinking, it's still really important that you keep listening to this episode. It's still really important that you open up to see how it might have become a stumbling block in your life.

Because I guarantee, even if you don't think, "Oh, I want to loosen up or I want to have that liquid confidence, liquid courage," even if you don't think that that applies to you, I guarantee that your relationship with the emotion of awkwardness could probably use some improving, even if it's not connected to drinking. It probably can use some improving so that you can show up differently in your life.

For me, awkwardness was a huge reason why drinking became a habit for me. I had so much anxiety around socializing and getting drunk was the only way that I knew how at the time to get a momentary bit of liberation from that emotion. But of course, I wasn't actually liberating myself. I thought I was when I was drinking, but the awkwardness would always reappear. It would always show up the next time.

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And even though I felt like drinking was giving me a little bit of relief, a little brief respite from feeling awkward, of course, that wasn't the case. It was a false respite. I wasn't ever actually learning how to deal with the emotion of awkwardness. I wasn't learning how to cope with it differently. I didn't even understand how I was playing a role in creating it.

So all this time, I thought that drinking was helping make awkwardness dissipate, but actually, it was doing the opposite. It wasn't helping me become more of myself. It was harming me in the sense that I was becoming more and more anxious about awkwardness appearing, and I was feeling it more and more. It was growing. It was becoming a bigger presence in my life.

And I had to do this work not only around changing the habit, but I had to do this work when I wanted to show up differently in my life, when I wanted to start a new career, when I wanted to create this podcast, when I wanted to reach out to people with my message. It was really important that I learned how to start to feel more capable in the moments when awkwardness appeared.

So that's what I want to cover with you guys today. What awkwardness is and what it isn't, why you don't want to feel it and why people try to avoid that feeling of awkwardness, and what's actually creating it, because I guarantee it's not what you think. When you understand that, then you can really learn how to start changing your relationship with awkwardness, which guess what, will have such huge impacts not only in changing your relationship with drinking, but changing the way in which you show up in the world.

So let's just start with what awkwardness is. You've heard me say this already. Awkward is an emotion. It is a feeling state in your body, and this is really important for you to understand. It was really important for me to understand because I was always going around thinking to myself, "I'm just so awkward. I'm just an awkward person. I have an awkward body."

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That's what I was thinking all the time. I didn't recognize awkwardness as an emotion. I thought it was part of who I was. I thought that it was a personality trait. I thought that I was born awkward. And I know that a lot of you can probably relate to that. You have to recognize that you can declare that you are feeling awkward, you are experiencing the emotion of awkwardness, but you, who you are, you are not awkward. That doesn't exist.

Now, I know that some of you are listening and you're thinking, "Wait a minute, but I know awkward people." Or you're thinking, "Yeah okay, but you don't know me. You haven't seen me in certain situations. I really am truly an awkward person." I'm going to tell you this; I'm right there with you because I spent such a long time fighting for this to be a true thing about me. Fighting and trying to convince other people that I was truly just an awkward person and that was the problem.

It was such a long-standing practiced belief of mine that I really wanted, in a weird way, to convince people and to convince myself that it was just a true thing about me, even though it was really painful to think that thought. It was really painful to think, "Oh, I'm just awkward. That's just who I am."

And I think that's a really important thing for you to understand, if you notice yourself kind of clinging to this idea that yes, there are awkward people and you might be one of them, it's really important for you to understand why that happens. We become so committed to being right about who we are, even when being right about ourselves is really painful.

And the reason this happens is because the brain wants to be efficient. It wants to save energy. And thinking thoughts that it has practiced for a very long time, that are very easy to think, that it has a lot of evidence for, that saves a lot of energy. So the brain would rather be right about something that is painful, something that causes a negative emotion for you, simply because it saves energy. Not because that thought is true.

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So keep that in mind if you're listening to me talk about this and really feeling like, "Yeah, but you don't know me, I think I am just an awkward person." Keep in mind that maybe your brain just really wants to hang onto this thought that it has a lot of practice thinking and a lot of evidence for, because hanging onto the thought, even though it doesn't feel great, saves energy.

So just to reiterate, you don't know awkward people and you aren't an awkward person. Now, you might know people who you perceive are not meeting certain social expectations. Maybe you perceive that they are talking at the wrong time, or you perceive that they're talking about something and not adequately gauging the interest of the room.

And you might believe that you don't know how to navigate certain social expectations, but here's what I want you to know about social expectations; they are all made up. They are manmade creations. Social expectations are just rules that humans created, and you know what? The rules are changing all the time. There is no set norm of how humans should behave because humans are constantly rewriting the rules.

What is appropriate or what we believe to be appropriate varies based on culture and it varies based on time and place. So certain social expectations that people will say, well, if you're not following them, you're acting awkwardly or you're being awkward, guess what? They change over time.

Just think about etiquette. Think about the norms that we as a society have kind of written up and subscribed to and we say, "Okay, you have to follow these norms to be a member of polite society." They're totally made up. Etiquette is totally made up and it's always changing.

I was doing some research for this episode and I came across this gem. This one is so good, of etiquette from the 1840s. So this was written in a book in the 1840s about how to behave in polite society, and here it is. "If at

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another's house you should break anything, do not appear to notice it. Your hostess, if a lady, would take no notice of the calamity, nor say as is sometimes done by ill-bred persons, 'Oh, it is of no consequence.'"

So listen, if you need me to translate that, what it's basically saying is if you break something at someone's house, you and the host should act as if nothing happened. Do not even acknowledge the damaged item with an I'm sorry, and the host should not say, "Hey, don't worry about it."

So I want you to picture this. You knock a vase over and you're at someone's house and you have no reaction. You just keep talking. But also, they have no reaction. They just keep talking because according to this book of etiquette, to acknowledge the broken vase would be the height of awkwardness.

Now, think about bringing that concept into today's world. We think the exact opposite. If you're at someone's house and you broke something in front of the host and you didn't say anything and the host didn't say anything, the people who would be watching this interaction would be like, "What on earth is going on? This is so weird and so awkward. Is anyone going to mention the broken vase?"

But in the 1840s, apparently that would be the height of awkwardness. And this is why there is no such thing as awkward people. You aren't awkward and other people aren't awkward. What's happening is that you are observing your own behavior and judging it as not meeting some sort of social norm of expectation, that PS, is always changing, or you're observing someone else's behavior and doing the same thing. Judging that as not meeting a certain social norm or expectation.

But all these social norms and expectations are completely made up. They're always changing. They're different from place to place. They're different from culture to culture. So awkwardness is not just a fact. It's a

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judgment that you make, which means that it's always being created by you.

You can decide in any moment that however you're standing, whatever you're doing, whatever comes out of your mouth, whatever you did is just something that happened and that it was authentic to you in that moment. Or - and this is what we do - we label it as wrong; we decide that we're being awkward, we decide that we need to change, we decide that we don't fit in, and then of course we feel all this negative emotion.

But awkwardness is just an emotion that is created by your mind. It's created by your thinking. That's how the think-feel-act cycle works. Awkwardness is that feeling created by your thoughts. It doesn't exist independent from your mind. Isn't that crazy? Awkwardness does not exist independent from your mind or anyone else's because it's created by the mind.

It doesn't exist in the world until you have a thought that creates it. And that is really important for you to understand if you are sure that sometimes you're awkward because when we have that belief that it's somehow innate or inherent to who we are, then it's like, well, what do I do? I need to change me, I need to change my being, when really, all you need to do is change what you're thinking.

And the same is true of any situation that you're deeming awkward. Right now, you're thinking that the situation is awkward because you believe that the situation itself is just awkward, but of course, that's not what's happening. It's how you perceive it.

When you understand that you are the one creating awkwardness, you are the one creating that emotion, either about yourself or about other people, listen, that is where you get so much freedom. Because of course, so many people are trying to avoid awkwardness all the time. They don't realize that they're the creator of it with their mind.

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So it's important for you to understand that awkwardness is an emotion, but it's also important for you to understand, well, why is it that you don't want to feel it? Why is awkwardness a feeling state that needs to be avoided? And I think really all you have to do is understand why it is that you avoid any emotion. Why is it that you decide that certain emotions are problems and that you shouldn't feel them?

Of course, it's because of what we make the emotion mean. But when you really go into what awkwardness feels like in the body, when you really pay attention to the physical sensations, how your body moves and shifts and behaves when it's feeling this emotion rather than your whole narrative about how you shouldn't feel this way and you don't want to feel this way and it's terrible, you start to really understand it from a different perspective and you start to see, maybe it's not as big of a deal as you've been telling yourself.

To me, when I'm watching something and my thought is, "Oh god, this is so awkward," the emotion that I experience, it feels in my body kind of like a full-body cringe. And what I mean by that is my body almost wants to retract away from the source of what I perceive to be awkward.

Sometimes this will happen when I'm watching something on TV and I have the thought, "Oh god, this is so awkward." So what will I do? I'll turn my head away, my eyes will squint. I might even cover my eyes or hide under a blanket. My mouth will grimace. My chest will collapse. My shoulders come forward. It's like I'm pulling into myself. That's really all that's happening. It's not a big deal. It's not something that you need to run away from.

But I think it's important to distinguish between how you experience awkwardness when you perceive someone else or a situation as awkward and how you experience awkwardness when you're labeling yourself that way. Because I, for me, have found that the experience is kind of different.

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When I label myself or my own actions as awkward, it's different than that kind of full-body cringe. Instead, what I notice is that I get very still. And it's a little bit like I want to be frozen. I feel awkwardness a lot in my face. It's like I'm trying to hold my face in a way that's like, "Hey, everything's normal. See? My face is totally normal. I'm normal," but inside it doesn't feel normal.

And the more I paid attention to these sensations, the more I noticed that I had a lot of tension in my cheeks and a lot of tension in my jaw because I was actively trying to hold my face in a so-called normal position. I'm trying to hold my face in a way that I think others will see as acceptable. And you know what? That takes a lot of energy, which is why I was having all this tension in my cheeks and tension in my jaws.

You can think about it like an awkward smile. Like you're forcing yourself to look a certain way when that's not actually how you're feeling. It takes a lot of work and a lot of energy. And I also noticed that I had so much judgment of my body.

So I had these sensations that I was feeling in my hands and my arms and my legs, and there was all this judgment about it, and it sounded like, "I don't know what to do with my hands. I don't know where to put them. I don't know how to stand. I don't know how to hold myself." And suddenly my body would feel so ungainly, like I no longer knew what to do with my limbs.

Normally, I'm not walking around thinking, "Hey, should my foot go here and should my hand go there?" But when I'm feeling awkward, it's like I get this heightened awareness of all my limbs, and that awkwardness comes with confusion. It comes with I don't know how to hold myself or I don't know what to do.

And that's a really important piece. For me, awkwardness is really mixed in with thoughts about confusion and uncertainty. So the first set of thoughts

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when I'm judging myself as awkward is, "I'm not doing this right, I'm not dressed correctly, I'm not speaking at the right time, I don't know how to say hello, I'm not fitting in with the social norms that I perceive around me."

But listen, it's also connected with a second set of thoughts that create confusion and uncertainty. And those thoughts sound an awful lot like, "I don't know what to do. I don't know how to hold myself. I don't know how to make small talk. I don't know how to go up to someone and say hello. I don't know how to introduce myself. I don't know how to be normal. I don't know how to fit in."

That's, to me, what's happening. I'm judging myself as wrong and then telling myself that I don't know how to solve my wrongness. That really sums up what's happening inside of me when I'm feeling the emotion of awkwardness. Instead of thinking, "You know what Rachel, however you're showing up right now, it's fine, it's authentic to you. Whatever you're doing, however you're acting, it's just a result of a thought and a feeling."

Instead of understanding that, I'm labeling my awkwardness or this is what I've done in the past is label it as an intrinsic quality or a sign about who I am as a person. These people are normal, I am awkward, when of course, that's never the case. The only reason you're feeling this way is because of all of the thoughts that are saying what you are doing, how you're behaving right now is wrong and that you don't know how to solve this wrongness.

But here's what I want you to know; when you start to understand that your thoughts are truly the source of awkwardness, it has nothing to do with you, it has nothing to do with the situation, then you really understand your way out. Because how awkwardness feels is really not a problem until you start judging those sensations in your body negatively. Then it becomes a big problem.

Then you tell yourself, "I hate feeling this way, it's unbearable, it's too much, I need to escape." That's when I would want to run and hide in the

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bathroom, especially if the drinks hadn't kicked in yet. But you can see how alcohol then becomes this way to escape or attempt to escape your body when you're feeling awkward. Let me just drink over my awkwardness.

And it works this way because alcohol depresses a part of your brain. It depresses that prefrontal cortex where thought processing is happening, where your consciousness is centered. So basically, it momentarily quiets your inner critic, so you become less inhibited. When people say, "I need a drink to loosen up," that's what they really mean.

What they mean is I need a drink to quiet that part of my brain that is judging me right now as wrong and telling me that I don't know what to do or how to behave because I don't know how to quiet these thoughts on my own. But of course you don't know how to quiet these thoughts on your own because no one ever taught you to observe your mind in this way. No one ever taught you about the think-feel-act cycle.

So what do we do? We treat this inner critic as if it's just this radio that is just reading off the headlines of the day. It's just reading the news, never realizing that the think-feel-act cycle gives you the power not only to question what you are hearing, to challenge what right now that inner critic wants you to believe is just the headlines, but it also gives you the power to change stations.

You don't have to drink until you can no longer hear that inner critic. You just need to learn how to tune into a different station. You don't want to feel awkwardness right now because you are labeling it an emergency, and you're thinking that it's the truth. You're thinking that whatever thoughts you're thinking are just facts, when truly, they are optional thoughts.

All that needs to happen now is that you just need to understand that the radio station might need a little updating. It might need a little makeover. What you're thinking about yourself, those automatic thoughts, maybe you need to swap them out with something that's more helpful.

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Because the more you try to drink over it, the more entrenched these thoughts become. And guess what? It's not just drinking, people. Because sometimes I wasn't trying to drink over my awkwardness. When I was trying to change my relationship with alcohol, so I took many breaks in my 20s where I would go periods where I wasn't drinking, but I didn't understand anything about the think-feel-act cycle, I didn't understand anything about how to manage my mind. I was just using sheer willpower.

If I couldn't drink over my awkwardness, I would try to eat over it. You would find me at the party hiding by the cheese plate. I was trying to occupy myself with food, to give my body something to do so I didn't have to feel the awkwardness that was coursing through my veins. And if I wasn't eating, I'd be smoking. And then I'd be on my phone.

And you can see this all the time now, right? Everybody's got these little computers in their pocket. It's like, oh, I don't have to deal with my awkwardness because I can just look down at my phone and pretend that I'm doing something when really, I'm just like, can I scroll through this and scroll through this and scroll through this until finally I start feeling a little less awkward?

That's what people do. They'd rather immerse themselves in their phones in an attempt to avoid feeling awkward because they have all this judgment that awkwardness is unbearable and they don't realize that it's just an emotion that you are creating with your mind.

So what you really need to do, it's not to drink over it, it's not to eat over it, it's not to just stare at your phone, it's not to hide out in the bathroom. It's to learn how to deal with awkwardness differently. So you first have to see that it's a feeling state that you're creating with your mind. You have to let go of the beliefs that you are somehow inherently awkward, or even that you can be awkward.

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You can't. You can just have judgments about how whatever you're doing isn't fitting some sort of societal norm. But then you have to also find the thoughts that are creating the awkwardness. You have to understand how that think-feel-act cycle is working for you and start seeing that often, it is not just a judgment about how you're doing something wrong, it's a judgment about how you don't know what to do next.

You don't know how not to be this wrong way. You don't know what to say, you don't know how to hold yourself, you don't know what to talk about. So that is all incredibly important, but I'm going to tell you, the most important thing you can do to learn to deal with your awkwardness differently is to practice feeling awkward.

I know that's not what you wanted to hear. You wanted me to give you the magic pill that you wouldn't have to feel it anymore. But listen, it's a normal human emotion. You can have less of it. I promise that that is possible. But you cannot erase awkwardness from the human experience, just like you can't erase sadness. It's an emotion.

Even when you master the think-feel-act cycle, even when you learn how to manage your mind, there will be times, especially if you are growing and you're challenging yourself and you're putting yourself out there and you're going after your dreams and what you want in life, you're going to feel awkward sometimes.

But once you know that it's not a big deal, once you know that you don't need to drink or eat over it, you don't need to look at your phone, you don't need to hide out in the bathroom, then you see, oh, this is normal, this is perfectly fine, not a big deal. I'm feeling a little awkward, but there's some information in that emotion for me.

You can use it as a way to grow, instead of teaching yourself to numb and escape from it, which only has awkwardness grow even more instead of you growing. So I will tell you some of the ways that I have practiced having

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more and more comfort with awkwardness, and I'll tell you it's still a practice for me. It's still something that I regularly work on.

One thing that I started doing when I was still living in New York, so I probably started doing this about six or seven years ago, I was chatting up people during the day. Just random people that I encountered; I would try to start a conversation with them. Now listen, this is not something that came naturally to me.

I used to go into stores and get into cabs and I would say the obligatory hello and thank you, and that was it. I didn't want to have a conversation; I didn't want to make small talk because that was awkward. I didn't know what to say, I didn't know what to talk about, I didn't know what to do, and I was pretty sure they didn't want to talk to me.

And if I started talking, they were going to think I was a weirdo. But here's the thing; I knew when I committed to changing this habit, I knew when I committed to saying, "You know what, I'm going to learn how to do all the things that I've been trying to use a drink to help me with," and one of them was coping with the feeling of awkwardness, I knew that this was something that I needed to commit to doing.

And so, I started doing it, even though it felt very awkward at first. And you know what I discovered? Some people aren't interested in talking to me, but most people are totally happy to have a conversation. Most people like to be acknowledged as human and have a little small talk and not just have all of their interactions be hello and thank you.

And that has been like a springboard for me. If I can chat up strangers in the checkout line, if I can chat up my Uber driver, I can probably chat up a stranger at a party. And if I can do that even when I'm feeling awkward, even when I'm noticing all that judgment that's creating the awkwardness, I probably don't need awkwardness to be something that stops me and has me hiding, has me looking to escape.

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So that has been really important for me. I still feel awkward sometimes, but I've stopped believing that I feel that way because of who I am. I've stopped believing that I am just an awkward person, or that I am the source of it in terms of my being, just emanates awkward. I see that awkwardness is created by my mind. It doesn't exist at all until I judge something that I'm doing or I'm judging myself or judging other people as awkward.

And the other thing that I've done to practice really leaning into this emotion is when it appears, when I'm doing something like watching TV. So in the past, I would have turned away, I would have hid, I would have closed my eyes, I would have hid under the covers even sometimes, put that blanket over my head like, "Oh god, this is so cringe-worthy, I don't want to watch it."

But instead, what I've done is ignore the instinct to take cover and see that as a choice. See it as I can decide right now to keep watching. I don't have to turn away. And just by doing that has radically changed my relationship with awkwardness. Because when you're always turning it away, when you're always like, "I can't look, it's too embarrassing, it's too much, too awkward," what you're doing is kind of shutting yourself down to the experience of it.

Instead of opening yourself up to see, hey, what's going to happen in my body when I just watch this situation, this scene, this event unfolding that my brain wants to believe is very awkward? What's happening in my body? Then you start to see like, yeah, it's not that big of a deal. This emotion that I've been so sure I don't want to feel and it's a horrible problem and I wanted to drink over and eat over and hide out in the bathroom and stare at my phone, it's really not that big of a deal.

And if awkwardness isn't a big deal, you will amaze yourself at what you are willing to do, how you are willing to show up in this world, what you are willing to go after. Because you know, even if awkwardness does appear, even if you have a thought judging yourself or judging the situation as

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wrong, even if you feel confused about what to do next, that's okay. The emotion that you feel inside of yourself really isn't that big of a deal.

You can keep taking action, you can keep moving forward without numbing or escaping, and without fixing yourself because you don't need any fixing. The awkwardness is never inherent to you, it's never built in. It's just a judgment that you're having. And this work, I promise you, even if you're right now listening and thinking, "I don't drink in social situations because I need to loosen up, it's totally different for me," I promise you that it will transform your relationship with awkwardness to start to open yourself up to it.

It can make such a big difference in your life. Alright, that's it for today. I will see you guys next week.

Hey, if you're a woman who enjoys this podcast and wants to have me as your coach, you have to join the *Take A Break* program. It's a 30-day break from drinking that will teach you how to say no to your urges without deprivation, the secret to not needing a drink in any situation, including not needing a drink to take the edge off, and never again feeling like you can't trust yourself around alcohol. Join me over at RachelHart.com/join. Together, we're going to blow your mind.