

Ep #161: Shame



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Rachel Hart

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You are listening to the *Take A Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, episode 161.

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 my friends. How are you? This is going to be a two-part podcast series. I'm going to be covering, in this episode, shame, and then in next week's episode, self-forgiveness. And I'm doing it because Lent is actually coming up at the end of this month. It's on Wednesday, February 26th.

And I'm going to tell you this; I'm not an expert on Lent. I'm not an authority on Ash Wednesday or Good Friday or Easter, any of it. But I am an expert in taking a break from drinking and doing so in a way where you actually change your desire, you change your relationship with alcohol, and I'm also an expert in the role that shame and a lack of self-forgiveness actually plays in fueling the habit.

And I'm going to tell you this; here's what I've discovered. So many of my clients use Lent as a reason to take a break from drinking. Some of you have grown up giving up something for Lent, that's a long-standing practice and observance for you. Some of you never go to church and you aren't particularly religious, and maybe you're not even Christian, but you like having Lent as an easy excuse for why you're taking a break.

You just get to say, "Oh yeah, I gave up alcohol for Lent," and be done with it. And listen, for those of you doing it, no matter where you fall on the spectrum, I love it. I love that you're finding a reason to take a break. Do it

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for dry January, do it for Lent, do it as part of an elimination diet or the Whole30 or sober October, I don't care what your reason is. Just find a reason to give your mind and your body a break from drinking because not only is it beneficial for how you feel and your wellbeing, it truly can change your life forever. Because when you do it the right way, you change your relationship with yourself.

So many people will say, "Rachel, why does the Take A Break program cover so many topics beyond just drinking? Why aren't you just talking about alcohol?" And the reason is I believe that you cannot change the habit in a vacuum. The habit of drinking intersects and overlaps with your relationship with food and yourself and your body and other people and fun and your ambitions, and most importantly, your relationship with alcohol, it stymies your potential.

It gets in the way of everything that you can put out into this world and everything that you can be. And I know some of you are like, "Listen, I just don't want to drink so much. I didn't know we were going to be talking about my relationship with myself and my potential," but that's what I do. If you want to talk about alcohol and only alcohol, there are people out there who do that.

This probably isn't the podcast for you then. Because I believe who cares if you take a break from drinking but you don't like life as much, if you don't have as much fun, if you aren't able to figure out how to relax, if you feel like something is always missing, if you feel like you're always the odd man out? Who cares?

I mean, it's great for your liver, but suffering in the name of health is not the name of the game here. I don't see a point in it. I did it for many years myself and I will tell you this; it is not sustainable. Drinking really is a backwards attempt at trying to create wellbeing. And I say backwards

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because you really are putting the cart before the horse. You're doing things in the wrong order.

Your underlying wellbeing has to be what always comes first. How you feel without a drink has to be the primary focus. Most people want to do it in reverse. They want to drink to feel good and to have good wellbeing. They want to drink to feel included, drink to feel relaxed, drink to feel fun, drink to feel fancy, instead of learning why it is they don't feel these things in the first place. Why it is they need a drink in their hand.

Because you can have all of those things, no help needed from booze. You're searching for something outside of yourself and it's in a wine glass, so you think, and I promise you this; when that is the way that you're approaching your wellbeing, it's never going to be enough. And it's why you're drinking too much right now; it's why you have a habit because there's not enough alcohol in the world to create true wellbeing.

Alcohol doesn't create wellbeing. If it did, we wouldn't need to go back to it over and over and over again. Alcohol creates the opposite. It creates more longing. It creates more desire. It creates more of a sense that you need this thing that you actually don't at all, especially not if you learn how to manage your mind using the think-feel-act cycle, because that's what I teach. How you can truly feel good on your own, how to have real pleasures without the side effects. That's what is available to you.

And so I really wanted to do this two-part series for those of you who are thinking about okay, Lent's coming up, maybe I could use that as a reason to take a break. I think that is so powerful. This episode is going to be about shame and the next week I'm going to talk about self-forgiveness.

So Lent of course, if you don't know, is about repenting for your sins and seeking forgiveness, hence the topics I chose. But maybe we can reframe this. In fact, let's reframe this because I think it's in need of a reframe. I am

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not about taking a break from drinking to make up for bad behavior or to punish yourself from last night.

If you try to use a break from drinking to make up for the things that you've done, I promise it will backfire. I say this having had lots of experience trying to do this myself. Because what you're doing is, you're starting from a place of negative belief about yourself, and guess what, once we understand how the think-feel-act cycle works, the negative thought is not going to produce a positive result. It doesn't work that way.

So if you want to use Lent as a time to actually take a break and not have it be I'm going to make up for being bad or my bad behavior, if you want to really learn about the habit, why you've developed this relationship with alcohol, but also, how to create true sustained wellbeing, then stay tuned to the end of this episode and I'll explain how you can do that with me.

So let's talk about shame. Sounds like such a great light topic. But listen, guys, it's something that you have to understand. You have to understand what it really is, what creates it, and I think most of you want to understand this last bit, how to have less of it in your life.

We can't remove it entirely forever because we can't remove any of our emotions permanently, but we can have less of it. And I'll tell you this; I used to be someone who was drenched in shame. I had shame about my drinking and shame about my body, I had shame about things I had said and done, shame about my past, shame about so much in my life. It was an emotion that I carried with me a lot and it wasn't fun.

But here's the thing; shame simply is a state of mind that you're experiencing in your body, and it doesn't feel very good. Now remember how you feel is created by what you're thinking, so I thought that I had all this shame in my life because of all of these things that I had done and things about me, intrinsic to me, but that was never the case.

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I had shame because of what I was thinking. So you don't need to look for the source of your shame anywhere other than the sentences running through your mind. Shame isn't I did something wrong or I did something bad. Shame is the sentence, "I am wrong. I am bad." And that distinction is everything.

Listen to it. It's not I made a mistake. Shame sounds like I am a mistake. This sentence is telling you that you're unworthy or incompetent or that something is wrong with you. Shame is created from sentences that have assessed that you are the problem.

Now listen, the difference in word choice here is really subtle. The difference between I made a mistake, I am a mistake. I did something wrong; I am wrong. I did something bad; I am bad. That's really subtle, but I will promise you this, when you start understanding it in the think-feel-act cycle, you will see that the levels of pain between these two thoughts, it truly is staggering.

Shame is an emotion that focuses on you being the problem. There's something wrong with you, there's something wrong with your brain, there's something wrong with your body, there's something wrong with who you are and how you show up in the world, there's something wrong with your urges and your desires and how much you drink. That's what shame is all about.

But guess what? There's nothing wrong with you, or your brain, or your body, or your urges or your desire, or anything that you've done. That's what I want you to start to get a glimpse of. Shame is always, always, always caused by a thought. It's not caused by what you did or what you said or anything about you.

And that is really important for all of you who have woken up from a night of drinking too much and felt really intense shame. I know that was me. I was

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so sure that I was in such deep shame lying in bed in the morning because of what I did the night before. “I can’t believe I drank so much; I can’t believe I did that. I can’t believe I said that. I can’t believe I texted that person or made that phone call. I can’t believe I slept with this person. I can’t believe I behaved this way in front of my family or friends or coworkers.”

Shame is also I can’t believe that I can’t remember. Of course, when I couldn’t remember, I wasn’t imagining the best. I was imagining the worst of what could have happened. Now listen, everything that you ever did while you were drinking is not the cause of your shame. I really cannot stress this enough.

Whatever you did, it doesn’t create a feeling until you think a thought about it. It is neutral until you attach judgment to it and I know a lot of you are really resistant to hearing me say that because I was too. I know some of you are thinking, “Rachel, you don’t know what I’ve done,” and you’ll say, “How could I possibly think anything different about the things that I’ve done or said, or how much I drank?”

And I want you to know that this isn’t about papering over everything with roses. This work is about trying to understand why you did those things. Why did you drink so much? Why did you say the thing? Why did you do the thing? Why did you sleep with the person? Whatever it is.

And why you did the thing cannot be understood if you are just steeped in judgment about yourself because the answer for why I thought I did the thing, my answer was often internally because I’m a fuck-up. Listen, I don’t swear a lot on this podcast but truly, that was my thought. That, to me, was the explanation for everything that I was judging as shameful.

I did it because I was a fuck-up. That was my answer to everything. And I want you to know this; I know a lot of you have that thought as well. But

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whatever you did, cheating, stealing, driving while drunk, getting into a fight, dancing on a table, taking off your clothes, having sex with someone, I don't care what it is. Whatever you are feeling shame about, you did because you're a human being who had a thought in your mind.

Your action, whatever you did, was the result of the thought that you believed in that moment and the feeling that triggered the action. That's it. It has nothing to do with who you are as a person. You simply had a sentence that you believed, that triggered a feeling, that you acted on. Period. End of story.

Now, you might say, "Well, okay Rachel, but someone else wouldn't have had that thought. They would have known better." Oh really? Because guess what, no one, and this includes people who don't drink at all, no one is immune to shame. Unless you are a psychopath, you will feel shame because you are a human.

So feeling shame is kind of good news. It means you're not a psychopath. But everyone feels it. As long as you are alive, you will have things that you judge later as regretful. You will have things that you do later that you say, "Why did I do that? What was I thinking?" Because welcome to being a human. This is what it's like.

I always thought that I was so alone in my shame. I always thought it was so hard for me to accept that other people could feel shame in the way that I did because it felt like such a singular experience, but that's how shame works because shame is all about singling yourself out as wrong and broken and different and the problem.

So of course, we never see connection, we never think about how others experience shame as well. We just think about our own shame, and that's kind of the tunnel that we get lost in. People feel shame about drinking, and you know what, they feel shame about food and they feel shame about

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money, and they feel shame about work and their body and their family and their past.

People feel shame about basically everything. It's universal. You're not special for feeling it. The fact that you feel shame makes you just like everyone else. You have to remember this because when we're in a shame spiral, we so believe that we're completely alone with it.

Shame about your drinking, about how much you drink or drank or what you did last night, I guarantee that it's only ever going to lead to more drinking. It's only ever going to lead to fueling the habit of disconnection and hiding.

Because so often my thought was well if I'm such a screw up, I might as well drink. If I'm so messed up, I might as well get some relief from my life, because shame is always leading to behaviors of hiding and numbing and overdrinking and overeating. It's not leading ever to what you actually want, which is a change in your behavior.

And sometimes it will lead to trying to prove that nothing is wrong with you. I kind of swung on the other end of this pendulum as well. So I'd feel a lot of shame and I'd think, "Okay, well if I can just be perfect everywhere else, if I can just accumulate enough gold stars and do everything right, maybe I'll feel better about myself."

So I'd work really, really super hard and try to accomplish all these things and do everything right and check everything off my to-do list and hope that that pesky little shame would go away, hope that I could kind of be good enough on the frontend so I wouldn't have to pay attention to the shame I felt on the backend.

But guess what? It won't work. You can't achieve or accomplish your way out of shame. The only thing that you can ever do is change what you're

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thinking about what happened. That's the only way out of it. And I know some of you are saying, "Listen, I hurt people. I caused harm. How can I not feel shame?"

And I want you to know this; you may have caused physical injury to someone, but you didn't cause their emotions. That's never how the think-feel-act cycle works. Now, that doesn't mean that you just wipe your hands and absolve yourself and say, "Well, I'm not in charge of your emotions, I'm not responsible for it."

It's understanding that why someone feels the way that they do is based on their interpretation of what happened. It's based on the sentences running through their mind. How do we know this? Because we watch this happen in our lives all the time, that people don't have a universal reaction to everything.

How someone responds in a situation, how they feel depends on what they're thinking, depends on what they make it mean. Just look at how people respond to being injured. It's not some universal response. Some people will get injured and they will focus on the future and getting better and doing the physical therapy and they'll think about the silver lining, and other people will wallow in self-pity and resentment and fixate on wanting to change the past.

Now, neither response is right or wrong. But the difference is all what they're making the injury mean. Now, because I know there's going to be a lot of resistance from you guys for pieces of this, I know because I had so much resistance myself, I often would tell myself, "Well listen, the shameful thing I did, it really shouldn't have happened. I should have known better."

Now remember, things are not inherently shameful until you judge them. But I'm going to tell you something. Whatever happened, of course it should have happened, because it did happen. That is the way the world

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works. Whatever happened was supposed to happen because it did happen.

Because if you try to argue that it shouldn't have happened, you get into an argument with the past, which you can't win because you can't change it. We have not figured out the time machine yet. And arguing with something that you can't ever change is not very productive. Whatever happened, it's over and done.

It now only exists currently in your mind as a thought, and telling yourself over and over again that it shouldn't have happened, it's not going to ease your pain. It's certainly not going to ease someone else's pain. It's not going to do anyone one bit of good.

Notice as you hear me talk about this how much you want to resist this concept; how much you want to hold onto your shame. And I want you to consider, why is that? If shame feels so terrible and it isn't really helpful when it comes to changing habits or changing behaviors, why do we want to keep it?

And I think the reason is because we have been taught over years and decades and centuries and thousands of years, eons, we have been taught that shame is actually productive. Humans have a long, long history of trying to use shame as a tactic to change people's behavior.

Shaming people not to drink or not to eat or not to have sex or not to spend money, it's very ingrained in society, and I want to explain why this is. Without the framework of the think-feel-act cycle, human behavior can seem pretty confusing. It can be kind of inexplicable why people do the things they do. So without the think-feel-act cycle mapping out why everything happens, people and their actions, it's really mysterious.

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Think about how many times you've watched someone else and thought to yourself, "Why on earth are they doing that? Why are they acting this way?" Think about how many times you've thought that about yourself. Your own actions have seemed like a mystery to you. Why am I drinking if I know it's bad for me? Why am I eating this if it hurts my stomach? Why did he yell at me? Why did that person cut me off?

Without the think-feel-act cycle, you're just kind of left scratching your head. I don't know. Doesn't make any sense. It seems like it's all one big mystery. And if you don't know why someone did something, yourself included, then how are you possibly going to go about changing it? There's no framework, there's no roadmap.

If you don't have the map for why it happened, you can't possibly retrace your steps and figure out a new route. And so what do humans do? They try to use shame. Maybe we can shame people into behaving differently. And there's a reason why shame was chosen. Because the brain has such a strong instinct to stay alive. We want to survive.

I've talked about this before but being accepted by a group makes survival easier. It becomes easier to find food and shelter and clean water and warmth if you're part of a group, rather than trying to do it on your own. So being accepted by the group, by the pack, is hardwired into the brain. It's something that the brain sees as that's good for survival.

So if the pack says listen, you're a bad person and if you don't shape up, we're going to kick you out, that's a pretty big incentive to change, especially when you need that community to survive. And I think that's the reason why shame was built into so many moral frameworks and so many religions.

This idea that like, you're bad, so follow these steps in order to be good, but also in order to be accepted, in order to stay alive. And it does get

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some people sometimes to change their behavior on the surface, but it doesn't actually ever change the underlying habit.

So this is why people will switch habits all the time. Even if you stop drinking, you can still have lots of habits of numbing. Because you haven't changed the underlying habit. And listen, even if it does get someone to stop their behavior, it doesn't get them to feel better about themselves.

When you're not feeling very good about yourself, I guarantee that you're showing up in other places negatively. So I think it kind of comes out sideways. But the truth is that shame for most people doesn't work at all because guys, if it did, if shaming worked, we have been using it for a really long time.

If it works, no one would be drinking too much or eating too much or having sex outside of marriage or be in debt. Because we have all been shamed to death for thousands of years about all of these things. And I think the reason why humans have kept up with shame as this vehicle, this idea that it will change behavior is because they don't know what else to try.

If you don't know how the brain works, if you don't understand anything about the think-feel-act cycle, if you want to change your own behavior, then it's like, alright, we've been using shame, let's just try to feel bad enough about something. Maybe that will do the trick.

It was the best tactic that I think humans had for a very long time. Maybe if we threaten people's survival, it will work. I just want you to consider that we're kind of ripe for a new tactic here. And I know that a lot of you are reluctant to stop shaming yourself because you fear it will mean that you're saying that whatever you did, your behavior is okay.

And if you don't like your behavior and it's not giving you good results, you don't want to give yourself the stamp of approval. But just consider this; if

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shaming yourself into change was really effective, shouldn't it have worked by now? If feeling bad about yourself was a ticket to success, wouldn't you no longer be drinking too much or drinking at all?

Because I'm certain that you have been shaming yourself plenty. I see that with all of my clients and I know that from firsthand experience. I was shaming myself all the time, feeling like, I mean, I couldn't just sit around and say that my behavior was okay, I had to feel bad about it. But guess what? It wasn't helping.

Because the truth is shame does not work, period. Full stop. And studies have shown this over and over again. When teachers try to use shame as a tactic in school, kids either shut down and stop trying so that they can avoid being shamed in the future, or they push back. They start demanding attention or disrupting classrooms.

When teens are shamed into not having sex, they're less willing to talk about sex with their parents or their doctor. They're more likely to engage in risky behavior, like unprotected sex. They're less likely to get tested for STDs, and they're less likely to report sexual abuse.

When people are shamed about their weight, they're less likely to seek medical care or exercise, and they are more likely to engage in disordered eating. And guess what? When people are shamed about alcohol use, for example, the approach used in 12-step programs and told that they have to admit that they're powerless and admit the exact nature of their wrongs and all of their shortcomings and focus on everyone that they've ever done harm to, guess what happens?

Many people avoid seeking help altogether because it means confirming everything that they already think about themselves, which is something is wrong with me, that's why I'm drinking too much. But nothing is wrong with you. All you have to do is put the thoughts that lead to shame, the thoughts

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like, “I’m bad, I’m a screw up, I’m messed up, something is wrong with me,” put them into the think-feel-act cycle.

And ask yourself, what happens when you feel shame? How do you show up? And for those of you who might say, “I double down, I work harder,” well, what happens when you fail? What happens when you make a mistake? I bet you’re more likely to quit, you’re more likely to throw in the towel. You’re more likely to dive deeper into your shame spiral.

Because now you tried so hard to be a better person and even that didn’t work. This really is the key. You are never going to be able to shame your way into a different relationship with alcohol. The only reason you did whatever it is you’re currently labeling as shameful is because you had a thought.

And until you stop judging it, you won’t ever be able to work backwards and find that thought and question it and challenge it and understand why you believed it and come up with a new thought to think. Shame is old news. We need something different. It’s time for something different. It’s not working.

So listen, next week I’m going to dive into what I really see as kind of the other half of this, which is self-forgiveness and everything you need to understand about that. But in the meantime, if you are interested in taking a break and you want to use Lent, which starts on Wednesday, February 26th as a time to do that, but not just to say to no alcohol, but to really learn how to change your relationship to drinking, learn the tools that I teach about when it comes to managing your mind, and really learn how to let go of shame, then this is the perfect time to join my Take A Break program.

When you sign up using the link, rachelhart.com/lent, you’ll actually be able to start specifically with me on February 26th, and you can take a break and do it without gritting your teeth. You’ll have access to live coaching with

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me. You'll have access to learn all of these tools on how to manage your mind and really, you'll finally be able to start letting go of some of the shame that you have been carrying around with you about the habit.

We got to let go of it here because I promise you this; if you don't, it will come out sideways in other places and I don't want that for you. So if you're interested, go on over to rachelhart.com/lent. Join me there. I am so excited to take you guys through the Take A Break program. It really will change everything for you. Alright, I will see you 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.