

Ep #170: Are You Drinking to Cope?



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Rachel Hart

[Take a Break from Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #170: Are You Drinking to Cope?

You are listening to the *Take A Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, episode 170.

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.

Well hello everybody. I always get asked questions about where I come up with my ideas for what I'm going to talk to you about on the podcast. I'm going to tell you, they come from everywhere. Literally everything in life. Not just the women that I work with in the Take A Break program, but they come from TV and they come from my family and they come from things that I see out in the world.

But today's idea came from a pretty unlikely place. It came from an email that I got from my financial advisor. So my husband and I have a woman who advises us on our finances. She is unbelievable. We love her. And she sent an email to all of her clients about her perspective on what is happening in the economy right now.

And I was reading through it, because of course, I want to be on top of my finances and I want to take it seriously, so I really believe very much in paying attention to everything that she sends me. And I was kind of taken off guard because all of a sudden, I got to a line in her email and it said, "No wonder alcoholic beverages sales rose 55% the last week of March compared to 2019. We are coping."

And you know, I wasn't expecting to have her reference drinking in this email, but I was so fascinated, not only by the percentages that she was citing in this email, but also her kind of summation of what it meant, which was we are coping.

Ep #170: Are You Drinking to Cope?

So I did a little research into the background and it turns out she's totally right. So the market research firm Nielsen, reported that sales of alcohol in the US rose by 55% in the week ending March 21st. So this was right after a couple states issued the very first stay-at-home orders. But it gets even more interesting because they also noted that online sales of alcohol are up 243%. So it's a huge jump from last year.

Now, what struck me was not only the increase, which I've talked about on this podcast before, how people are kind of using what's happening out in the world and the pandemic and COVID and using that as a justification to drink more, but I thought it was really fascinating that she summed it up as we are coping.

Because that really is the language around how many people talk about this increase of drinking that has happened over the last month. People are saying, "We're just trying to cope," and that really got me thinking, I got to talk with you guys about this today. I got to talk to you about what it means to cope.

Now, here's what I want you to know. If you're drinking more than usual right now, that's okay. If you're having a ton of urges right now, that's okay. Now, I don't think the solution to dealing with your stress is to drink, but the point of this episode and the point of all of the work that I do is not about judging you or giving you a little slap on the wrist and saying you should know better.

You know I don't believe any of that works. And I certainly don't want you judging you because when you start judging yourself, that doesn't work. I just want you to go on a little journey with me, and together, let's look and see why it is that you may be in this situation of trying to cope with how you're feeling right now by pouring yourself a drink, and let's just see whether or not it's working for you.

Ep #170: Are You Drinking to Cope?

We're just going to look at the data. It's not about shaming. You know this. Shame has no place here. It has no place in your life. It has no place in your progress to change the habit of drinking. What I do want you to make room for is let's understand what coping is and what coping isn't, because I think so many people are confused about this. I was confused about this for a very long time.

And let's just see if we can find some strategies that actually help you cope if alcohol isn't working for you right now. If it's working for you, fantastic. But you're probably not here. You're probably not listening to this podcast if it's working for you. If it's not, no problem. We're just going to find something that does.

So you guys know that I love to define words. I think I make my father, who is a retired English teacher, very proud that I love looking at the dictionary and I go to the dictionary all the time. So I was looking up what it means to cope. And there are a lot of definitions out there.

Oftentimes, I actually use a definition that I find out in the world, but this time I didn't. And the reason why I didn't use the definition that I found is because it actually is totally not in keeping with the think-feel-act cycle. So most of the definitions I found about what it means to cope, what that word means, talks about taxing circumstances or difficult circumstances.

And you guys know that circumstances, describing them as taxing, describing them as difficult, that actually runs counter to everything that I'm teaching you here. Everything about how your thoughts and your feelings and your actions, that's where you need to pay attention to. What you're thinking about, how those thoughts create your emotional experience, and then what you do as a result.

So we're not looking at the circumstances of the world and pointing a finger there and blaming that. We're not looking at other people and pointing a

Ep #170: Are You Drinking to Cope?

finger there, blaming those people. We're saying, hey, let's look and see what's happening in my mind.

Because even right now, even right now with everything happening in the world, I'm going to tell you, circumstances are not taxing or difficult. Even in the midst of a worldwide pandemic. Now, I know some of you are hearing me say that and you're like, "Rachel, what on earth are you talking about?" But the fact of the matter is what makes whatever is happening in the world or whatever is happening in your life or whatever your boss did or whatever your partner did, what makes it taxing and difficult is what your brain is making the circumstances of your life mean.

And this can be about COVID, it can be about an email that you got from your boss this morning. It doesn't matter. Where you have to pay attention is your thinking. What are you thinking about COVID? What are you thinking about that email you got from your boss? What are you thinking about what your partner or your mother or your child, what are you thinking about what they did or did not do?

That's where you have all your power, when you start focusing not on other people and not on the world, but what's happening in your mind. Because of course, that is the place where you can start to shift. You can start to change. You can start to decide, I'm going to think something different on purpose.

Now please, let me be really clear. Because if you are new to everything that I'm teaching here, when I say that circumstances are not taxing or difficult until you have a thought, that does not mean that you should go about your life believing that everything is rainbows and daisies and unicorns.

If you know me, everyone in my life knows I do not go about life that way. Just saying, "It's all wonderful, it's all beautiful, it's all lovely." No. What I'm talking about is understanding that your brain, the sentences in your mind,

[Take a Break from Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #170: Are You Drinking to Cope?

what you're thinking about, that's what's actually making and creating your emotional experience. It's created inside of you. Not outside of you.

And we know this because we can see that different people have different reactions to the same circumstances. Just look around. Not everybody is reacting the same way to the fact that we're sheltering in place. Not everybody is reacting the same way to the fact that businesses are closed, or schools are closed, or what's happening in the news. The headlines. We're not all reacting the same way because we're having different thoughts.

We think differently about what is happening, and those thoughts, for most of us, number one, they have been for your entire life pretty much unexamined. Number two, your brain gets into patterns. It likes to think what it's very good thinking about. It likes to create habits, not just the habit of drinking, but habits around thinking.

And once you start to understand that, you get so much more authority. You get to really understand and see, "Oh, the reason why I'm feeling this way, this emotional experience, it's a place that I can understand why it's happening. I can just go into my mind and I can look there."

I see this all the time with my husband. I have to tell you, my husband and I always joke, if we could just predict what the other person will want or how the other person is used to doing things, we just have to think of the opposite of how we do it. We are incredibly, incredibly different from each other.

And you put my husband in a situation and you put me in that exact same situation, and I guarantee that we are going to have very different responses, very different reactions because our emotional experience is different because what we are thinking is different.

Ep #170: Are You Drinking to Cope?

I'm going to tell you this; I actually love this about our relationship. And this is something that I had to really learn how to love because at first, I'm just like, why don't you just think like me? Why don't you have the same thoughts? Why don't you have the same emotional experience?

But here's the thing; I started to understand and learn, oh my gosh, it's actually amazing that this person in my life, this partner that I have is so radically different and thinks so differently than I do because it's always a little reminder to myself, "Hey Rachel, the reason you are feeling the way you are right now is just because of a thought you're thinking. Because just check out your husband. He is having a very different emotional experience."

So here's the thing; we got to push aside the dictionary definition of what it means to cope. It does not fit with the think-feel-act cycle because you aren't coping with your circumstances. You're coping with how you're feeling. What is making a current circumstance, whatever is happening in the world, what someone said to you, what someone did or didn't do, the number you see on the scale, how much you drank last night, whatever it is making that current circumstance difficult or taxing is your emotional experience of it.

Now, I want you to really think about that. If you are having a positive emotional experience, then there's nothing to cope with, right? If you feel good, if you feel happy, if you feel content, you don't have to cope with anything. We don't have to cope with our emotions because we're happy with our emotions.

But if you feel stress or anxiety or fear or sadness or anger or boredom or loneliness, well, then you've got something to cope with because most of us do not like feeling those emotions. We don't know what to do with them. No one has ever explained to us that they're harmless and that they're not a problem and that they're normal. We spend our lives trying to run away from them.

[Take a Break from Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #170: Are You Drinking to Cope?

And so the definition I came up with is this; coping is an attempt to manage your emotions. It's the way in which every human tries to deal with how they are feeling. And of course, we do this in so many different ways. Drinking is just one of the many ways that humans try to manage their emotions.

But I think that this shift in the definition is really important. Because if we're trying to cope with the coronavirus, or we're trying to cope with our boss, if that's what we're saying we're trying to cope with, we will very quickly feel helpless because we're going to see very quickly, well, I can't control the world. I can't control this virus. I can't control my boss. I can't control my partner. I can't control other people, so what am I going to do?

That feels terrible. When you realize, "Oh god, I think the source of my pain is what's happening in the world and I can't do anything to change it, so how here I am helpless," well, no wonder then you find yourself heading to the kitchen, looking for something to drink or something to eat.

But here's the thing; when you shift your definition and you understand that actually, what you're trying to cope with is not COVID, it's not your boss, it's not the headlines in the world, what you're trying to cope with is your emotional experience, then you regain all of your authority. You get all your power back.

You stop being helpless because your emotional experience is something happening inside of you. It's something created by the thoughts that you think. And also, that emotional experience is totally harmless. It's just some physical changes happening in your body. Maybe your breathing speeds up or slows down. Maybe your heart rate changes. Maybe you feel warm or you feel cold. Maybe you notice different sensations in your forehead or your neck or your torso or your hands. That's all that's happening.

And when you bring your focus inward, oh my gosh, then you have so much control. Now listen, dealing with how you feel, managing your

[Take a Break from Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #170: Are You Drinking to Cope?

emotions doesn't mean, oh, we just got to figure out how to erase all the anxiety and worry and doubt and fear and all of that from my life forever.

I watch my clients do this. I watch my clients when they start embarking on this journey and they take a 30-day break from drinking and they start learning about the think-feel-act cycle and how to manage their mind, I watch them start to try to get rid of all the negative emotions.

Now, the problem here is it's impossible. We don't get to do that. That's not part of the bargain of being human. What we get to experience is the light and the dark, the good and the bad, the positive and the negative. It's the 50/50. It's the full spectrum of an emotional experience. And that full spectrum includes all the emotions.

The work really then is not to erase negative emotions so that you never have to cope with them. It's learning that your emotions, all of them are harmless. They're not emergencies. You don't need to stuff them down. You don't need to drown them in booze. You don't need to try to outrun them. You don't need to go into hiding.

Because all of those activities, stuffing them down and drowning your sorrows and trying to hide from how you're feeling, all of these activities are acting like the emotion has all the power, when the emotion, your emotional state has no power at all. You have all the power. You always get to decide how you're going to react.

The only problem is we're not taught how to do this. We're not shown that we can do this. So to cope means to manage your emotions, and part of learning how to manage how you feel is recognizing that your emotional state has zero power over you. Zero power. This was a huge thing for me to learn. I did not understand this.

Think about it this way. You're not forced to yell or to stomp your feet when you're angry. You get to choose how you're going to react. You're not

[Take a Break from Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #170: Are You Drinking to Cope?

forced to snap at someone when you're annoyed. You get to choose your tone. You get to choose whether or not you're going to say anything at all.

You don't need to keep yourself so busy so you don't have a moment to think when you feel grief. You get to choose how you're going to respond to that emotion. And you certainly aren't forced to drink to deal with anxiety or fear or doubt or worry or whatever emotion it is, because the emotion itself is harmless and you are in charge of how you respond to that harmless sensation in your body.

That is such a different but incredibly powerful way to start to understand your emotions and understand the power that you have. Because you can't manage your emotions successfully if you don't understand this piece. This piece that you're the one in charge. You're the one with all the power. You always have the ability to choose how you're going to show up.

Now, oftentimes it doesn't feel that way because we're so habituated into certain responses and reactions that we have for some of our emotions, but that's okay. It's just a habit. You can change any habit. You can learn to show up differently. It is possible. I say this as someone who, oh my gosh, did I use to lose my temper like it is no one's business. I really did.

I just got angry and fly off the handle. I don't do that anymore. Not because I became some sort of enlightened being. I'm not. Because I started realizing that I was the one making the decision. I could start to choose to show up differently.

Because the thing is this; you can manage your emotions successfully and you can manage your emotions unsuccessfully. There is coping that is going to add stress to your life and there is coping that is going to reduce stress. And this is the key that most people are missing.

So here's the thing; coping isn't just managing your emotions. It's managing your emotions successfully. And when I say managing your

[Take a Break from Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #170: Are You Drinking to Cope?

emotions successfully, what I mean is that you're managing your emotions in a way where you're not adding further stress to your life.

So you're not experiencing a negative emotion like frustration or anxiety or fear or anger, and then trying to drink or eat or shop or run or hide, whatever it is, you're not then trying to cope with that emotion that way. So you're already feeling the stress from the negative emotion and then adding more stress with the ways in which you're trying to cope.

So there are ways in which you can cope that will add to your stress, and there are ways that you can cope that will reduce your stress. And most people never understand this piece of it. Most people are in this place of thinking coping is me trying to deal with this challenging world, this challenging person.

No, coping is you learning how to manage your emotions that your brain has told you incorrectly, that those emotions are challenging. They're not. But when you manage them successfully, you don't add further stress into your life. I think this is the difference between when you're actually problem-solving, rather than problem-stalling or problem-generating. That's what happens when you're coping in ways that actually adds stress to your life. You're actually creating more problems for yourself.

This is what is so important to understand. What matters then is not the means by which you are coping with how you feel. What matters, what is most important is the outcome. This is when I say things like alcohol is not good or bad. It's the result that you're getting. That's what matters.

What is the result that you get when you pour a drink to cope with stress or anxiety? What is the result that you get when you open up a bag of chips or eat a candy bar to feel less bored? What is the result that you get when you go on Amazon and start shopping to distract from loneliness? What is the result that you get when you just go for endless runs as a way to run away from your grief? What is that result?

[Take a Break from Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #170: Are You Drinking to Cope?

Let's not take the activity and say, oh, well drinking is bad, or overeating is bad and exercising is good. No, that is so pointless. Who cares about the activity? The activities are totally neutral. What matters is do you like the result? And if not, please don't beat yourself up. Let's just figure out a way for you to cope where you like the outcome that you're getting.

When you drink to cope with the fear and anxiety you have around anything in life, maybe it's a pandemic, maybe it's just the fear and anxiety you have about meeting new people, you just have to ask yourself, what am I creating for myself right now? What's the outcome or the result that I get?

This is where most people don't bring enough attention to this area. Because the result really is twofold. First, your brain learns - when you are pouring a drink to deal with anxiety, your brain learns, "Oh, when we feel anxious, we should have a drink." It starts to use the emotion as a cue to drink.

So before you know it, your brain will start to be like, "Oh, anxiety, let's get a reward." It will start to become part of the habit cycle. So you get into the habit of, "Oh, I'm anxious, let's open up a bottle of wine." So that's problem number one. You're not learning how to successfully manage anxiety on your own. You're learning how to cover it up and you're creating a habit in the process.

Now, people will say to me, "Yeah, but Rachel, I feel better. I feel better when I'm anxious and then I pour myself a drink. I mean, come on." Now again, you guys have to look at the big picture. This was the piece that I missed for so long because you know, listening to this podcast, one of the reasons why I poured myself a drink and another and another was to deal with my own anxiety.

And I felt very stuck because I really was convinced, "Yeah, but it makes me feel better. Yeah, but then I loosen up. Yeah, but then I can forget

Ep #170: Are You Drinking to Cope?

about the day.” I didn’t understand that I had this really narrow, narrow view of what was actually happening.

And I’m just going to tell you this; if you right now are telling yourself, “Yeah, but I feel better, it does help,” really ask yourself, why are you here? Why, if you feel better when you drink, why are you listening to this podcast? You have to really be honest with that question and with that answer that you have.

Because the problem, the second problem that is created when you use a drink to try to cope with how you’re feeling is that you actually don’t like the results that you’re getting from it. You don’t like feeling that you kind of need a drink to relax, or to open up. You don’t like all that desire that you have or the fact that you notice your brain already thinking about the drink. It’s not even four.

You don’t like how much chatter there is in your brain about drinking and how much to drink and whether or not you’re going to drink and how much other people are drinking. You just want to be present with people. You don’t want to be fixated on the glasses at the table.

And you don’t like how you feel the next day. Maybe you don’t like what you said or how you acted, you don’t like the disturbed sleep, you don’t like the empty calories. You don’t like how you behaved in front of your kids or with your partner. Just really be honest with yourself. If you truly liked the results, you wouldn’t be here.

Now, it’s okay if you don’t like them. Most people don’t want to look at the negative results that they don’t like because they’re so sure that this habit means something really negative about them, when in truth, it means nothing. All it means is that nobody ever showed you how to cope with how you feel. No one ever showed you what to do when you feel a negative emotion.

Ep #170: Are You Drinking to Cope?

And so you know what we all did? We've all just been meddled through the best that we can. And we've had a lot of people modelling, "Hey, just have a drink. Hey, just eat something. Hey, just buy this. Hey, just go for a run. You'll feel better." But here's the thing; if you look at the results that you're getting, you're going to start to notice if you're not liking them, they're actually adding additional stress to your life.

And right at that moment when you see that, it is really easy to put your head in the sand and say, "Yeah, but I do feel better in the moment." But all you're doing then is ignoring the fact that once the buzz wears off, you are not better at dealing with anxiety. And now you have the net negative effects of pouring a drink to deal with how you feel.

So you've added more stress to your life. You have the fact that you may be waking up the next day feeling a little anxious or feeling a little blue. This used to happen to me all the time. Because what I didn't know at that point in my life was that my brain was desperately trying to cope with how I had jacked up all my neurotransmitters the night before with everything that I was drinking, and now it was trying to recalibrate itself.

I didn't understand that that was one of the side effects. So many women say this to me. So many women who do my 30-day program are just amazed at just by taking a break from drinking, they have so much less anxiety. They wake up feeling so much better in the morning. You know what it's like.

I remember this, when you wake up, the moment your eyes open, you just feel kind of down or blue or anxious. It is the worst. But that is one of the ways in which having these coping mechanisms that aren't serving you are actually adding additional stress to your life.

So you have the worry, you have the added desire, you have all the negative thoughts about, oh god, what does it mean about me? PS, it means nothing. You have the negative effects on your health and your

[Take a Break from Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #170: Are You Drinking to Cope?

relationships. And when you're really honest with yourself and you look at it, then you get to see, you know what, this way of coping, it's not actually coping. It's not actually helping me manage how I feel, manage my emotions in a way that is successful and reduces the amount of stress in my life.

I think it's kind of like this; it's a little bit like when people say, "Yeah, but it makes me feel better." It's a little bit like when we read the introduction and maybe the first chapter of a book and we never make it all the way through to the end. We just keep reading the intro and the first chapter over and over again.

And so it's still kind of stuck. We're spinning in this place of like, yeah, but when I had the buzz I felt really good, or when I ate that cupcake it tasted really good, or when I pushed buy now, I got that little rush. See, it feels so good. But the thing is if you want to actually change this habit, you have to read the book all the way through. You have to get to the end. You have to ask yourself, hey, is there less stress in my life now or is there more?

Because now on top of whatever original emotion sent you to the kitchen or sent you to the liquor cabinet or sent you online or sent you kind of hiding or sent you to busy yourself so you didn't have a moment to think, whatever that original emotion was, now you have the negative outcomes from trying to use alcohol or food or shopping or overexercising or hiding out or distracting yourself, how you have the negative outcomes from that behavior.

So here's the thing, my friends. Coping isn't just managing your emotions. It's managing your emotions successfully, so that you don't add further stress to your life. And if you don't know how to do that, that is okay. Please do not beat yourself up. I certainly didn't know. No one ever showed me how to do it. No one ever modelled that for me.

Ep #170: Are You Drinking to Cope?

All you have to do right now is just ask yourself, what am I doing right now? Am I managing my emotions successfully, in a way that removes stress or a way that adds stress? Am I managing my emotions in a way that reinforces that how I'm feeling is a big problem and an emergency and I got to take cover, or am I doing it in a way that reinforces, you know what, it's not a big deal, it's harmless, I can handle this? I don't need to push how I'm feeling down, I don't need to drown how I'm feeling, I don't need to hide from my emotions.

Ask yourself, am I managing my emotions in a way where I will feel better tomorrow? Or are my attempts to manage how I feel, is opening up that bottle of wine, pouring myself a drink, is it actually leading to more stress? And if it is, please don't beat yourself up. That is okay. This is the beginning for you when you answer that question honestly. This is the beginning of change.

You have to get to this place where you're like, I'm not sure this is working, so that you can start creating the change that you want in your life. But please, please, do not pour yourself a glass of wine and say, "I'm just trying to cope," unless you really, really, honestly understand what that word means. Most of the world has no idea. Alright everybody, that's it for today. 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.