

Ep #172: The Reason You Drink Too Much



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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 172.

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 everyone. We are talking today about the reason you drink too much. Not the reason why you think you drink too much. The reason why it actually happens. And it is so important to understand this distinction because you will spin on this question.

Why do I keep doing this? Why did I drink that? Why did I say yes when I know it's not good for me? Why do I keep doing this to myself? These are questions that I asked myself over and over and over again for years and I watch my clients do the same thing.

But you know what, we don't just do it with alcohol. We don't just stay stuck in this spin cycle of wondering why it is that we keep overdoing it, why it is that we have this habit that's so challenging to change. We do it with everything. We do it with food. We do it with not lacing up our shoes to go out for a run.

We do it with money. We do it with so many areas of our life. And so if you can understand it here, if you can really start to shift your mindset here, you will be able to apply it to any area of your life that you want to change. That's why doing this work is so powerful.

Now, here's the thing. On the one hand, you have the commitment that you make to yourself. I'm not going to drink tonight, or I'm only going to have one glass. And then you have what you actually did in the moment. Now,

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when those two things don't line up and you don't like the result that you get, that's when it's time for you to get curious.

Be careful of your brain spinning on this question. Because the spin is not going to help you. It's only going to keep you stuck. So I'm going to show you today how to stop spinning and I'm going to do that by going through the answers, the reasons that most people fall back on when they're trying to understand that question for themselves, why do I keep doing this?

The answers that most people fall back on sound like this - and I know this not just because I hear it from my clients over and over again. I know it because I fell back on these reasons as well. So you might think, "Well, I just love to drink. I just love a good Cabernet. Or I love a fancy cocktail. I just can't say no. I don't know what it is, I just can't say no once I get started. Or I think I might have an addictive or compulsive personality."

And sometimes you might think to yourself, "I think I'm missing an off switch. I think I'm missing the thing that other people have." So I'm going to go through each one of these because I promise that none of these reasons are why you drink too much, why you have a habit around alcohol, or why you're finding it difficult to change.

So let's see how they're not the reason and then we'll talk about what really is. This first one, "I just love to drink," oh my gosh. I remember thinking this all the time. I just love it. It's so much fun. I just love to drink. Here's the thing; no you don't. Really, you don't.

Loving alcohol is not inherent to you. I talked about this all on last week's podcast. It is something that you taught your brain to love. You acquired the taste for alcohol. Alcohol does not taste good until you give yourself a reason to like it. I want you to really think about that.

Alcohol does not taste good until you give yourself a reason to like it. You know what it's like when you see someone try alcohol for the first time.

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Their nose wrinkles up, they kind of gag a little bit. This is not something that people are born loving. It's something that we teach our brain to love.

We give our brain a reason to like it, and of course, that reason is always the feeling that you're after. Feeling relaxed, feeling confident, feeling uninhibited. It's the feeling you are after, always. Always, always, always. Not the taste. Because it did not taste good at first.

The reason that you kept at it, the reason that you continued to drink wasn't the taste. It was the feeling. The taste and telling yourself that you like the taste is really just a convenient kind of high-minded excuse. "Oh, I'm just someone who really loves a full-bodied red."

It sounds so much better than saying, "Yeah, I'm someone that doesn't really know how to relax or open up on my own." And so we fall back on this idea that it's the taste and we just love to drink, when really, that's not the case at all. You have to stop telling yourself that the reason you drink too much is because you love to drink.

You have to really be more honest with yourself. Tell yourself, "I'm picking up this glass because I'm after a feeling." Can you imagine what would happen if you just started being that honest with yourself every time you reached for a drink? I'm just picking it up because I'm after a feeling.

If you stopped telling yourself the lie that, "Oh, I just love it, it's my favorite drink, it tastes so good," and instead, you told yourself the truth. "I'm pouring this, I'm drinking this because I'm after a feeling." And that's okay. There's no judgment here. We're not saying that's right or wrong. It's just so that you can really understand what's going on here.

Because when people come to me and they dig their heels in and they say, "No, you don't understand, I just really love to drink, I just really love this special kind of wine, I just really love this kind of cocktail," it's like blinders. It prevents you from seeing what's really going on.

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If you're just honest with yourself, "Yeah, I'm drinking this because I'm after a feeling," that would at least send you down a path of curiosity, a path where you could start to say, "Okay, well if I'm using it to relax or I'm using it to feel confident or I'm using it to open up or I'm using it just to stop checking my work email, what is the actual skill that I need to develop to learn how to do these things on my own without reaching for a glass?"

Then you at least have a path to change. When you're telling yourself, "No, it's just because I love it," then what's your path? To learn how to hate it? That's what so many people try to do. And I really have to tell you, I see so many people out there that are trying to convince people to stop drinking by telling them that it's poison and that it's a toxin.

And listen, yes, ethanol is something that your body, once you consume it, it really has to go to work to start to rid it from your body. It's not something that's naturally meant to be in there. And it is something that can damage your body.

But I just don't see any upside in telling people that the solution is to hate it because what I see happens is you just create this forbidden fruit. You create even more desire because now you have what you believe was your starting point, which was the love that you have for a drink, and now you're trying to convince yourself not to love it and you don't believe it.

And so all of a sudden, this thing has become off limits. It's become this forbidden fruit, as opposed to understanding, "Oh, it's not actually the drink. It's not actually the taste. It's not actually this vintage of wine. It's the feeling that I'm after." Then you have something so different to focus on.

So reason number one, "I just love to drink" is never true. You have to be honest with yourself. I'm just after a feeling. And I taught myself, I taught my brain how to learn to like and enjoy and tolerate and eventually love the taste because I was after feeling a certain way.

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Reason number two that a lot of people say is why they drink too much, why they have this habit, why they're struggling to change is because, "I just can't say no." I used to say this to myself all the time. "I just can't say no. Once I get started, I just can't stop. I just can't help myself. I don't have any willpower."

It feels terrible to believe this. It felt terrible when I believed this. But here's the thing; it's also not true in the slightest. It just simply isn't. Now, this is contrary to the message that we get all the time about how alcohol makes us powerless. It's not true. You have so much ability and authority to make decisions, even when you're drinking. But we're taught something very different.

I think about this a lot in large part because if I'm really honest with myself, most of the time when I was drinking, I didn't want a buzz. I wanted to get drunk. I wanted to get to the point where I didn't feel like me anymore. I wanted to get to the point where I didn't feel uptight or awkward or insecure or lonely or wondering what everyone was thinking of me.

I wanted to escape who I thought I was. And who I thought I was, I promise, was a whole lot of story that was not very kind. And you know what? A buzz was not going to help me escape my thoughts and my feelings. I needed to go all in.

And so when I really understood that, that what I was after was not that very subtle buzz sensation, because that wasn't enough. That wasn't enough for me to escape all my feelings and to escape my mind. I wanted more. I wanted to be drunk.

I think a lot of people often aren't honest with themselves about that because who wants to say, especially once we're out of college, who wants to say, "Oh yeah, my goal here really is to get drunk." But listen, if you are using a drink to change how you feel and to escape that inner critic, you know that that doesn't happen on one glass of wine.

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You need more. You have a desire to go all in. I think this is true for a lot of people. It isn't true that you can't say no to alcohol. What is true is that in that moment, you don't want to. I didn't want to for a long time. I wanted to have more. I wanted to get drunk. I wanted not to feel like myself. I wanted to not experience deprivation.

I didn't like feeling deprivation or restriction. But the truth is I could always say no, and so can you. The question is why don't you want to? Why do you want to say yes to another drink? Why do you want to have more? Why do you want to keep going?

What's the answer there? You have to be so careful not to say that you don't want these things. Because if you didn't want them, if you didn't want another drink, you wouldn't have it. Now listen, you may feel conflicted. There may be a part of you that wants the drink and a part of you that doesn't.

But acknowledge that the part of you that wants it is there. Acknowledge that conflict. Because then again, you're being honest with yourself. And the desire to say yes to a drink, it's always going to be easier in the moment, always. But it will always feel worse in the long run. It will always make the habit stronger.

While the desire to say no, it will take more effort in the moment, but it's always going to feel better the next day. You always feel better the next day when you wake up and you think, "God, I'm so glad that I didn't drink last night." Always feel better.

Because don't tell yourself that you can't say no, that you have no willpower, that you just can't help yourself because of course you can. Really think about it. If you were a couple of glasses in and your favorite celebrity happened to knock on your door because we weren't in the middle of sheltering in place or social distancing, but just hang there with me for a second.

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Your favorite celebrity knocked on the door and said, “Hey, I want to hang out with you for the day. I want to whisk you away, but listen, you can’t take the rest of your bottle of wine,” you would not be like, “Oh, I’m sorry, I’m going to choose my wine.”

The wine in that moment would become totally irrelevant because there in front of you was your favorite celebrity. You would immediately be able to access the ability to say no. I think this is really important to see. The truth is that you can say no but you don’t want to in the moment and your work is to figure out why.

Again, not with judgment, not with blame. Just with curiosity, to understand why is it? Why is it that I want to say yes? Why is it that I keep saying yes? Because so many people will come to me and just say, “I don’t know, I don’t know, I just can’t help myself. I don’t know, I don’t know.”

And I promise you this; when you are telling yourself I don’t know and that you just can’t help it, you shut down inquiry. You prevent yourself from understanding how the think-feel-act cycle is working and how the habit is unfolding.

So you have to step into your power. You have to acknowledge that hey yes, I would in certain situations be able to access my ability to say no. So what’s making that situation different and why am I struggling to access it now? Don’t tell yourself you don’t have power when you do.

The third reason - this is one that I believed a lot. I hear this a lot is, “I think I have an addictive or compulsive personality,” which basically can be summed up to mean, “I think I was born this way.” Not true. Not true at all.

I don’t care what your family history looks like. I don’t care how far back you can point to overdoing things in your life. Those are two things that I pointed to. Well, just look at my mom’s side of the family tree. And I’ve always been overdoing it, well before alcohol. I started with food.

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So I believed this lie that I had an addictive or a compulsive personality, which of course, when you're telling yourself that you were born this way, you're going to feel totally hopeless because well, if that's just who we are, what are we supposed to do?

But the fact is this; you and me and everyone, we all learned to make decisions about how we respond to emotions, including the emotion of desire. We have learned how to make decisions about this since we were a kid.

Now, we were doing it unconsciously. We didn't know that we were starting a pattern for how we make these kinds of decisions, but that is what happens. And we will just repeat this pattern over and over again. And here's the thing; it doesn't matter if you started drinking in your teens or your 20s or your 30s or your 40s or later. What matters is how you learn to make decisions about your emotions.

And I promise you, you learn that at a very young age. So if your brain learned, when I'm feeling a negative emotion, I find a way to escape, I find something to numb it with, then guess what? That decision-making process is going to stay on repeat until you learn how to intervene.

And here's the other thing. It will stay on repeat even if you stop drinking, unless you learn the skill of how to deal with your emotions in a different way. This is something that I could not get my head wrapped around for so long. I didn't understand why it was that I would take a break from drinking and then I would just start overeating.

Because it wasn't the overdrinking and it wasn't the overeating that was a real problem. The real problem was the fact that I had learned a way and a system for dealing with negative emotions, which was finding ways to escape. And I was going to apply this because that's the only thing my brain knew how to do, I was going to apply this no matter what.

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So if your brain learned as a kid that the solution to avoid deprivation wasn't to look at your mind and figure out why you were feeling deprived, but was to keep eating or keep watching TV or keep buying things, then your brain is going to continue down that path. That's all it is. You don't have an inborn personality that is standing in between you and change. You have a learned behavior.

And any learned behavior, you can learn to change. And here's the other thing, because people will often say, "But Rachel, I've been doing this for so long." I don't care. Because you've been doing it unconsciously. And when you bring consciousness to changing this behavior, you will be amazed how quickly you can start to unravel it.

Because this is the thing. You have a human brain. It is an incredibly, incredibly powerful tool once you know how to use it, how to wield it. Now, the very thing that you are blaming for why you drink too much, your brain, is truly the very thing that is going to solve this habit.

It is the thing that will help you change your desire and change how you deal with deprivation and change how you deal with every negative emotion. So you have to stop seeing it as the source of all your problems, and instead, see it for what it is, which is the solution.

And I'll tell you the final reason that I hear a lot for why you drink too much or why you have a relationship with alcohol that you don't like is, "I'm just missing an off switch." Now, this was something, again, for me, that I really believed.

And I'm going to tell you this. This is basically what you're saying when you think, "Oh, I think I'm missing an off switch." What you're saying is there are some human brains who just know that after 10 ounces of alcohol, it's time to flip a switch and start saying no.

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Now listen, it sounds kind of silly when I phrase it that way, but that really is what people kind of believe. Because I know I would look around and think, “Well, my sister knows when to stop and this other friend knows when to stop. So how come I don’t know when to stop? I must be missing something they have.”

Which of course, led me to feeling broken, which feels fantastic. But listen, your brain, every human brain is built the exact same way. That lower brain is built on the premise of find pleasure, avoid pain, and do so as efficiently as possible.

Now, you will hear people talk a lot, spend a lot of time talking about, “Well, maybe some people have an overactive reward center. Maybe some people are more sensitive to dopamine. Maybe sometimes different parts of the brain light up in response to certain substances.”

And I’m going to tell you this; you know what, all of this is probably true, but who cares? Who cares? Are brains kind of different? Sure. Because our bodies are kind of different. There’s diversity in body type, there’s diversity in brains. But I want you to really think about this for a second.

Imagine for a second, if you told yourself, “Well listen, the reason that I’m a couch potato, the reason that I’m not a runner is because my DNA shows that I have very low aerobic potential and my organs don’t utilize oxygen as efficiently as someone else’s,” imagine if this was the excuse you were giving yourself.

If you were telling yourself the reason that I’m not a runner, the reason that I’m a couch potato is because of my DNA, because of something inherent inside of me, it’s not the case. The reason you’re not a runner is because you’re not lacing up your shoes and going out for a run.

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Even if we could prove that you had the best genes in the world for athletic performance and that everything in your DNA said that you could be an elite athlete, you still have to decide to run. You still have to decide to do it.

So when people say, “I think there’s something wrong with my brain, maybe I have an overactive reward center, maybe I’m particularly sensitive to dopamine,” even if we can prove that that is the case for you, what you are forgetting is the role of free will. What you are forgetting is the difference between predisposed and predetermined.

You have the ability to make decisions and to choose and whether or not you say no to a drink or you lace up your shoes has nothing to do with your DNA. It has nothing to do with what parts of your brain centers are lighting up or if you have a dopamine sensitivity. There’s no off switch that you’re missing. There’s nothing wrong with your brain.

And looking to your family history is pointless, and I really mean this. Because when I watch people do this, they do it to use it against themselves. They look to their brain or they look to their family history and they use it as a way to say, “See, I can’t do it.” You’re not looking to the fact that you have a human brain at your disposal that can literally help you accomplish anything you put your mind to.

You’re seeing your brain as a hindrance. And I just really think, so your father and his father and your cousins all drink too much. Who cares? There are probably hundreds, if not thousands of people in your family tree who didn’t. It’s totally irrelevant. What matters is only why you are saying yes to a drink right now.

Because here’s the answer to why you drink too much. It is not that you just love to drink or that you can’t say no or that you have an addictive personality or that you’re missing an off switch. None of these things are true. The reason why you drink too much, the reason why you keep

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drinking too much, the reason why you have a relationship with alcohol that you don't particularly like is simply because of a thought.

That's it. That's how the think-feel-act cycle works. You don't pick up the drink and bring it to your lips, which is the action. You don't do any of that in a vacuum. There's a thought and a feeling that comes before.

So I'll tell you, I spent all this time in my life searching for some deep elusive reason to explain why I had this struggle and other people didn't, and I just searched and searched and searched and I would spin on these questions. And I would feel terrible with all of these answers. I would feel so hopeless and so powerless.

But really, the answer was not deep and it was not elusive. It was just a thought. It was always just because of a thought. That's the entire story from beginning to the end. The reason why you have the relationship that you do with alcohol right now is because of a thought. The reason why you drank too much last night or last week or last year was because of a thought. That's it.

Now, why do you have thoughts like, "I want one, I deserve it, one won't hurt, I need it?" Because of everything you saw and heard growing up, maybe from your parents, maybe on TV, maybe from your friends, maybe in the movies, maybe right now in your Facebook feed or your Instagram feed, from social conditioning.

You have been conditioned to think this way, to think that alcohol is the solution, to think that some people are powerless around it. And no one has ever shown you how to think on purpose. That is what the think-feel-act cycle is all about.

It's learning how to observe your current set of thoughts and see what they're creating for you in life, and then learning how to think on purpose, learning how to change what you're thinking so that you don't stay stuck in

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the cycle of I want one, I deserve it, one won't hurt, I need it, who cares, screw it.

You have to learn how to see what those thoughts are creating for you and then how to change them. And I know that some of you will get stuck and think to yourself, "Well, my sister was raised by my parents and grew up in the same social environment and watched the same movies, so why isn't she struggling?"

And I'm going to tell you this; there is no secret here. It is because she has different thoughts that she practices when she's drinking, and I promise you it's happening probably unconsciously. But they might be thoughts like, "I don't really like ever being out of control, or I don't like how alcohol makes me feel, or I don't want to be someone who ever gets drunk."

That's the only reason. The only reason why someone else is able to say no and you're not right now is because they have a different thought from you. And the more that you practice your unconscious thought patterns, the stronger they will become. The more like second nature they will become, and that's how you develop habits.

The more you think, "I want it," and you reward that thought with a drink, the more powerful that thought becomes, the more it grows. Because your brain goes, "Aha, when I think this, I get a reward." But here's the truth; the more you think, "I'm saying no, I'm not drinking," and then you reward that thought with how you feel the next day, the more that thought grows.

The only reason you ever drink too much is simply a thought. It really is that simple and that easy. You really can stop searching for an answer. And I think that a lot of people are afraid to make it this simple and acknowledge that it's just a thought because they watch their brain kind of make a beeline for blame.

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And they tell themselves, “Oh, if it’s just a thought then it’s my fault.” No, of course it’s not your fault. This isn’t about blaming here. No one ever taught you the think-feel-act cycle. No one ever taught you how to observe your brain at work. And certainly, no one’s ever taught you how to think on purpose.

The reason why you drink is simple but it doesn’t mean that the execution of changing that is also simple. That takes practice. That takes - it’s kind of like lacing up your shoes every day and doing something even when you don’t feel like it, even when it’s challenging, even when you’d rather do something else.

That’s the work that I do with my clients, teaching them how to find the thoughts and then change them. Yes, this is a skill that takes practice, but I’m going to tell you, it is crazy powerful once you learn that the only reason you ever do anything is because of a thought that you are thinking.

When you truly understand that, you start to see how you can make change in every single area of your life. But before you can do that, you have to drop all the excuses. You have to drop, “I just love to drink, I can’t say no, I have an addictive personality, I’m missing an off switch.” You have to be willing to let go of these reasons because they all strip you of your power.

They will all leave you feeling hopeless and unable to change when the truth is, you are anything but hopeless and powerless. You have so much ability to change. That’s what the think-feel-act cycle can do for you. That’s what it can change for you.

So really, if you take anything away from this episode, just answer this question for yourself. Answer for yourself what you think is the reason why you drink too much and then start to interrogate it. If you really were going to say, “Well, it’s just a thought,” start to see all the ways your brain wants to come back and say, “No, not true. No, she doesn’t understand my

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situation. No, she doesn't understand my family history or my unique set of circumstances."

Really watch your brain want to fight this. Because when you start to see it's literally just a sentence in my mind that's standing in the way of the change that I want, you start to see just how powerful you are. Alright, 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.