

Ep #177: How My Approach Is Different



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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 177.

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. So here's the thing. Today, we're talking about how my approach to changing the habit of drinking and changing your relationship with alcohol is different. Now, last week, I talked about whether or not what I teach, the think-feel-act cycle is going to work for you. And today, I'm going to talk to you about why my approach is different.

Now, it may seem like I'm doing these two episodes backwards. Shouldn't I be telling you about how my approach is different before discussing whether or not it will work for you? But actually, they're not backwards at all because so many people take themselves out of the running before they even get started.

They decide that they're too old for change, they failed too many times, they have an addictive personality, it's baked into their DNA so there's no point in trying. And so the thing is that you have to do the work on your thoughts first about how this won't work for you before you can really understand how to start approaching your relationship with alcohol from a totally different perspective, which is what I'm going to be talking to you about today.

So if you haven't listened to last week's podcast, it's number 176. Make sure that you don't skip it because it is really important to uncover any of

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the limiting beliefs that you have about why this won't work for you. Today, we're going to talk about what makes my approach different, and I'll tell you, my approach is radically different from the most common approaches out there, namely AA and 12 steps.

It is radically different in many, many ways, but I'm going to do a deep dive into a couple of the areas for how it really differs. Now, I've already talked about on the podcast many, many times about the fact that alcohol is neutral. What I mean when I say that is that it's not good or bad and drinking is not right or wrong.

And I'll tell you this; a lot of people hear me say that alcohol is neutral and they get kind of excited. Because they're so used to people saying it's bad. They're so used to seeing it as having a negative moral value, and we're surrounded with a lot of those messages, especially when we want to change our drinking and change our relationship with alcohol.

But here's the problem. On the other hand, we're also surrounded with all the messages about how alcohol is the best thing ever and it makes everything better. This is the messaging that advertisers want us to believe and we get a lot of that through family and friends and peers and media.

So we're getting a mix of these two. We're getting a mix of listen, it's the worst thing ever, which is the messaging that comes out of a lot of approaches that try to deal with addiction and treatment and recovery, and then we're getting the message it's the best thing ever and it makes everything better, which is a message that comes from advertisers and people that want us to drink and drink with them.

So here we are in the midst of thinking, "I don't know, it's horrible, it ruins lives, it's poisoning my body, it makes me do things that I wouldn't normally do, and it's amazing and it's the best thing ever and it makes everything

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better and it makes me better and it makes situations more fun.” You can see how confusing it can be to have both sets of messages in your brain.

And of course, you do. How couldn't you? Because we don't live in a bubble. We get messages about alcohol all the time from friends and family and books and movies and advertisements. It's always kind of being programmed into our brain.

Now, what I'm asking you to consider is that alcohol is actually neutral, that it isn't either good or bad, right or wrong. And when you start to embrace this idea that alcohol has no moral value, you start to really understand how everything that we've been told to think, it's wonderful, it's terrible, you start to see how those thoughts actually impact how you show up with alcohol, your attempts to either drink less or to say no, and your attempts to change.

Because here's the thing; everything that humans think about alcohol, we all just made up. It literally was made up by the human mind. Alcohol existed on this planet long before humans did. The process of fermentation that results in ethanol happens without human intervention. And long before humans were even here.

So sure, humanity figured out how to harness this process and control the process so that we could create alcohol in larger quantities and create different types of alcohol, but alcohol was here before us. It wasn't good or bad before humans came to be. It just was a fact of being on this planet. It just was.

And here's the thing; it's still just a fact of being alive on this planet. Once humans came along, once we started interacting with it, once we started harnessing the process of fermentation, yeah, we started judging it and putting labels on it.

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But this is so important for you to really step back and embrace because until you see this, until you really start to understand how everything you think about alcohol is just made up, it's not the truth, it's just a thought that some human decided to think, and some of them caught on and some of them became more popular to think. Until you really understand this, you can't start the process of change.

So if you want to dive deeper into how alcohol is neutral, I really encourage you to dive into episode 35 of the podcast, which is all about why you should view it as neutral and why it is neutral. But there is another piece about this that I want to discuss that I really believe makes my approach different.

Because it's not just that alcohol is neutral and that we don't need to judge or label alcohol as good or bad or right or wrong, but so is drinking. Drinking, the act of consuming alcohol in any quantity is not good or bad or right or wrong. I don't care if you have one glass of five ounces of wine or you polish off the entire bottle.

I don't care how frequently you do it. It's not good or bad. It's not right or wrong. How much you drink has zero, zero moral value on you as a person. And this is where most people really get hung up. Because this is so different from what we have been led to believe.

So the brain is like, "Wait, that can't be right." We are so used to believing that if we drink and how much we drink and how often we drink has some sort of indication or play some sort of role into who we are as a person. So we'll tell ourselves, "I was so good. I didn't drink at all." Or, "I was so good. I only had one glass." Or, "I was so bad. I drank way too much. I got way too drunk."

We are so used to labeling how much we consume and whether or not we consume as being good or being bad or being weak-willed or undisciplined

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or selfish or disciplined. And because of this, because we see drinking too much as bad, what does society tell us to do? Well, you got to go punish that behavior.

If you're bad, you got to punish yourself. So we, as a society, have bought into this idea that we need to shame and coerce people into being better, into changing the habit. Now listen, many of the steps in AA are about this. In fact, steps four through eight really squarely direct people towards looking at the behavior, looking at the habit and labeling it as something that is wrong.

Step number four, make a searching and fearless moral inventory of yourself. Notice the word moral. So you're looking to see what's good about you, what's bad about you, what's good about your behavior, what's bad about your behavior.

Step five, admit to God, to yourself, and to another human being the exact nature of your wrongs. Again, labeling what you've done as wrong. When you label it as wrong, it's very hard to get curious about it because you've already decided that it's wrong. So there's no need to be curious.

And listen, if you're going to change the habit, you've heard me say this over and over again. Curiosity is the most powerful tool that you can bring to it. Because without curiosity, you can't understand how your brain is working. You can't understand how the think-feel-act cycle is working.

Step six, we're entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character. Again, listen to it. Defects of character. It's telling you that something is defective about who you are as a person. Something is defective about your attributes or your qualities as a human being.

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Step seven, humbly ask him to remove our shortcomings. Again, there we go with shortcomings. Everything that is wrong, everything that we're viewing through the lens as being moral or immoral.

And then step eight, make a list of all the persons we had harmed and became willing to make amends to them all. Why do you have to make amends? Of course, because you were bad.

Now listen, this is where what I teach differs dramatically. The language that we use to talk about why you drink and how much you drink and what you did while you were drinking and the choices that you made, you have got to remove all of the right and wrong and good and bad.

Not just because you're doing some sort of kindness to yourself. Because actually, the decision to drink isn't the result of who you are as a person. It's not the result of whether or not you are good or whether or not you are bad, or whether or not you're doing some right or whether or not you're doing something wrong. It's the result of a thought and a feeling and an action. That's it.

Listen, there is no shortage, and I mean none, no shortage of self-loathing and shame and guilt among people who are concerned about their drinking. And I know this firsthand because there was no shortage of all of these negative emotions in me.

They don't need more of it. They don't need more self-loathing and shame and guilt. You don't need more of it. I don't need it. Frankly, nobody needs it. Because guess what? Right now, I bet if you're struggling with this, I bet that you already have plenty. I bet that you already have plenty of thoughts that are creating self-loathing and shame and guilt.

And you know what, if those emotions were the solution, then you wouldn't need any other way forward. You could just guilt yourself and shame

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yourself and hate yourself even more, and then one day, you'd discover that you had a totally different relationship with alcohol. But it doesn't work like that, does it?

We are shaming ourselves and guiltting ourselves and hating ourselves into trying to say no, but that's not how it works. If you want to say no, you have to understand why you're saying yes. And the reason why you're saying yes has nothing to do with whether or not you're a good or bad person.

What happens instead when you feel bad and you feel self-loathing and shame and guilt around this habit is you probably decide, "Well, I mean, if I'm this screwed up, I might as well drink." I used to say that to myself all the time. I couldn't understand what was going on.

I couldn't understand why it is I felt like I had so much desire that I couldn't control, and I felt sometimes like I was making decisions that I knew weren't good for me but I didn't know how to change it. And so I just felt screwed up inside. And the more that I thought that, the more that I believed that, the more that I was like, "Alright, well, let's just drink. I mean, I can't figure this out. Something's wrong with me."

So you can do that, or you can actually use your attempts to help you change. So I want you to think about this. I want to think about how it would be different for you if every time you said, "You know what, I'm not drinking tonight or I'm only having one glass of wine," whatever promise you made to yourself, how would it be different for you if when you didn't keep that promise, instead of labeling it as a moral failing on your part, what would happen if instead you were like, "I wonder why. I wonder what was going on. I wonder what I was thinking. I wonder how I was feeling."

What would happen if you brought curiosity to it? Instead of saying, "Ugh, I was so good, I didn't drink for two weeks, and now I'm such a screw up, I'm drinking again." Because what ends up happening when you do that is you

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end up blaming the decision to drink on being a bad person, on there being something wrong with you instead of understanding how the habit is actually unfolding.

Habits have no moral value. They aren't operating on a system that is judging a behavior as good or bad or right or wrong. They're operating on a system in your brain that prioritizes finding pleasure, avoiding pain, and doing so as easily and efficiently as possible.

And until you understand that that's actually what's going on and that's actually what's driving the habit, until you let go of the belief that has been indoctrinated in so many of us that it has something to do with who we are as a person, you will not be able to change.

Everything I teach, everything is let's strip away all this judgment of right and wrong, good and bad, and just be curious about what is actually happening. Let's be curious about why you're saying yes, why you feel deprived, why you drank the bottle last night. Because when you can drop the shame and blame and drop all the worry that, "Oh god, maybe something's wrong with me, maybe I'm a bad person, maybe I'm weak, maybe I'm selfish," you can create change so much faster.

People hear me say drop the judgment and they think it's all about just be nicer to yourself. No, I want you to create change faster for yourself. That's the benefit of it. And here's the thing; as for needing a higher power, what I teach is you don't need a higher power to change the habit. You need the tools to harness the power of your brain.

That's where the real power is. I have to tell you, a couple weeks ago I heard my good friend Corinne Crabtree, which by the way, if you don't know her, you should know her. She's amazing. She is a total role model of mine and she has an incredible program called No BS Weight Loss and an amazing podcast.

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But anyway, I heard her say this recently and I thought it was so spot on, and I hope, Corinne, if you're listening, I hope I'm not butchering this. But she said, listen, I'm all about prayer, but I don't want that to be your plan. And as soon as I heard her say that, I was like, oh my god, yes. So good.

Because here's what I think. Maybe you communicate to god or spirit or consciousness or the universe or nature, I don't know. Maybe you communicate with something that you believe is outside of you and a higher power. And you know what, I'm all for that.

Connect with something that is bigger than yourself, bigger than all of us. It's an amazing thing to do. I do it all the time. It pulls me out of my very narrow perspective of how, oh my god, Rachel, your life is so hard and things are so difficult for you, and it connects me to the bigger picture.

But that line of communication, whatever it is for you, it's not the plan. A plan is listen, I know that when 5pm rolls around, my brain is going to start trotting out all the excuses of why it's a good idea to drink and how I need it and it will help how I feel and I deserve it and I'll be good tomorrow and it's really not a big deal. I know that those excuses are coming.

And I know that I've rewarded all of those excuses in the past by drinking. So now my lower brain is like, yeah, these are great thoughts to think, let's keep thinking them. And because of that, the lower brain is going to be really good at coming up with a lot of supporting evidence for them.

Because remember, that lower brain cares about finding rewards above anything else. So knowing all of this, what is my plan for handling this situation in the moment? That's what I teach. Having a plan is what changes everything. Learning how to adjust and adapt plans, learning how to follow plans when you don't want to. That is the key.

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That's why I think you don't need a higher power and not because there's something wrong with a higher power, but just because that's not actually going to give you the tool that you need. What you need is a plan in the moment that you can follow and that will help you actually change the habit.

Now, another thing that makes my approach different is that I don't talk about drinking too much as a disease. I don't think it is a disease. And a lot of people are going to really argue with me on this one. We've been taught that it's a disease.

You know what, that's okay. It's okay that they don't agree with me, but this is what I think. When you start defining overdrinking and you make it a disease, it becomes solely a medical problem. Now listen, do some people need medical intervention because they could literally risk their life by not drinking? Yes, of course.

But the vast majority of people are not in that situation. That is the minority when it comes to people who want to change their relationship with alcohol and change the habit. Talking about overdrinking as a disease, treating it solely as a medical issue, it leaves way too many people out in the cold.

I also just don't think that it's correct. Because when you think about, okay, what is a disease? A disease is an abnormal condition of a living thing, a plant or an animal that impairs normal functioning. So Alzheimer's is a disease, cancer is a disease, the coronavirus is a disease.

These are abnormal conditions that impair normal functioning of the body. When you drink too much, nothing is happening that is abnormal in the brain. Something very normal is happening in the brain. Your lower brain, which again is tasked with finding pleasure, avoiding pain, and doing so by the easiest means possible, it's fine. It's working perfectly.

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So, oh, I feel stressed, pour a drink. Now you feel that stress a little bit less. That was easy. Oh, I feel awkward. Have a drink. Now I don't feel that awkwardness as much. That was easy. Oh, I feel deprived. Have another. Now your deprivation has temporarily abated, until of course it comes back. But in the moment, your brain's like, that was easy.

Listen, you just had no idea that this was the process happening. You thought that the drink was about loving to drink, or you told yourself, oh, it just happened, I don't know how it happened, because everybody else was doing it or because I had a hard day and because no one told you how habits actually form and how they work.

Nothing abnormal is happening in your brain. Your brain is acting exactly as it's supposed to. Now, here's the problem. The more you repeat the pattern, the more it becomes a habit. So a habit is a choice that you deliberately make at some point. We all deliberately at some point made the choice to pick up a drink. We were consciously choosing to do it in the moment.

But at some point, you stopped being conscious about it. At some point, it becomes a formula that your brain automatically follows. At some point, once you do it enough, your brain starts to encounter a cue. Like it sees a wine glass or a time of day or a smell or an emotion or a situation or it's around certain people, and that cue starts the habit cycle.

So then you do the routine of pouring a drink and having a drink in order to be rewarded. It's all happening outside of your conscious awareness. And the trick is to bring it back, to bring it from your unconscious to your consciousness so that you can change it.

Now listen, alcohol can cause disease in other parts of your body. It can make it so that parts of you stop functioning properly. Heavy drinkers are at risk of cirrhosis and pancreatitis and osteoporosis. They are at increased

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risk of different types of cancers, including stomach and colon cancer, and they can get things like ulcers and gastritis.

So drinking can cause diseases in other parts of your body, but the act of drinking isn't a disease. It's the result of the think-feel-act cycle. It's a result of something that was previously conscious that became unconscious. It's the result of a cue and repetition and a reward.

It's the result of not knowing how to manage deprivation or how to manage boredom or loneliness or insecurity or awkwardness. It's the result of the thoughts and feelings that you have been totally unaware of up until now. And the thoughts and feelings that are driving the habit of drinking, they're not the domain of disease. They are the domain of habits.

I think this is such an important distinction, the distinction that I make between habit and disease because the disease idea is why so many people believe that something is wrong with their brain. Because that's what disease says. Disease says that something abnormal is happening that is impairing normal functioning of the body.

But when you understand how the lower brain works and how habits work, you see that that's not the case. There's nothing wrong with your brain. The only problem is that no one ever taught you how to manage it. No one ever taught you how to work with it. Nobody ever taught you how habits were created and how to start the process of unwinding them.

Because the truth is your brain is not the problem. It's your ally. Now, this might be something that you have a hard time believing right now. I know that for me, when I was really struggling with my drinking, it didn't feel like my brain was my ally. It felt like I was at odds with it all the time.

But truthfully, your brain is the only thing that's going to help you create the change you want. And that change starts with taking a break because

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taking a break is the fastest way to bring an unconscious habit to the surface, to bring it to your consciousness so that you can see it, you can understand it, and you can change it.

What I focus on is what you are learning when you are drinking, because listen, your brain is always learning something whether or not you like it. It's learning all the time. It learns with everything, including with alcohol. When you understand what you are learning when you say yes, then you have the path to change it.

If it's a disease, what are you going to do? You're going to hope for a new brain. This is what makes changing your relationship with alcohol and changing the habit such a powerful skill when you start to understand it from this new perspective.

It's why I call what I teach and the skill of learning how to manage your mind and learning how to change your relationship with desire with meta skill. Because what you are learning when you do this transcends the habit of drinking. You are learning skills that you will be able to use in every area of your life for the rest of your life.

Because here's what you need to know. Why aren't you going after your dreams right now? Because you have an urge to sit on the couch. Because you have emotions that you want to run from. It's always easier to do that than to create something amazing.

You aren't going after your dreams because you're afraid of failure, but failure doesn't feel like anything. What you're really afraid of is how you're going to treat yourself when you fail. What you're really afraid of is the shame and the guilt that no one ever taught you how to manage.

Learning to change your relationship with alcohol is learning how to change your response to your emotions. And by learning it in this arena, with the

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habit of drinking, you are practicing and mastering a skill that you can take with you and use for the rest of your life.

Learning how to watch your thoughts, understanding how your thoughts create your feelings, which drive your actions, that is the work of learning how to evolve to be the next version of yourself. Instead of running on autopilot, you take control of your mind. Instead of wondering, “God, why did I have the drink? Why did I eat the bag of chips? Why did I spend the money when my goal was to save? Why did I lash out? Why did I procrastinate? Why did I stay in bed?”

Whatever it is, instead of wondering, once you have mastered the think-feel-act cycle, you see that you always have the explanation at your fingertips. You don't have to wonder anymore. Once you have that explanation, you have the path you need to walk down to change.

And that really sums up what makes my approach different. When you start this work, you realize that alcohol, it's almost kind of beside the point. Yeah, it is the thing right now that you are using or not using to learn all of these tools and all of these concepts, but the real work that you're doing, it's changing your relationship with yourself. It's changing your relationships with your thoughts and your feelings and your actions and your dreams and your goals.

Drinking too much is not a sign that something is wrong with you. It's a gateway to learning how to evolve to the next version of yourself and the version that you are meant to be. 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

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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.