

Ep #188: Milestones



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Rachel Hart

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

Ep #188: Milestones

You are listening to the *Take A Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, episode 188.

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 going to talk about milestones today. And by the way, for those of you who were listening last week, I am sitting here in my brand-new office. We packed, we moved, we unpacked, we baby-proofed, we got everything set up, and it has been so easy. It's been the easiest move I've ever done.

Now, everything did not go as planned. People were late, things were broken, a lot of stuff took longer, a lot of plans that we had had to get shifted around, but we're here. I have my own office again, which after two years of not having my own office is amazing.

And right behind me, where I'm sitting, right behind my office, there's a little area that I'm going to turn into an art studio, which I'm so excited to do. And I'll tell you this before we get into milestones, I woke up pretty early the first night that we were here and I heard owls. And it was amazing. It was totally magical.

This house actually, it's funny, this house kind of feels like a milestone for my family. It really is a new chapter for us, a new beginning. And milestones are a big part of changing your relationship with alcohol and changing the habit of drinking, but not the milestones that you might be thinking of.

Because when we think about drinking and the habit of overdrinking, what has been ingrained in our culture is the idea of sobriety milestones. And

Ep #188: Milestones

what I mean by that is the idea that you need to hit a certain number of days, and that's what matters. How many days have you crossed off the calendar?

Now, if you listen to this podcast, you know that is not what I want you to focus on. In fact, I think that a focus on the calendar is actually very problematic, but it's really ingrained in our culture. People in AA will often mark these kind of days, these milestones by giving out little coins or tokens.

So if you've gone 24 hours without drinking or a month or six months or a year, you get this little medallion that kind of looks like a poker chip to carry with you. Now, here's the fascinating thing. I did not grow up knowing anyone in AA. I never saw one of these little chips, but I knew about them.

At some point, I learned about sobriety chips. That's how ingrained this idea is in our society, this idea that if you have a problem with drinking, the solution is to collect days, to cross days off a calendar. Now, I don't agree with this practice, but I also - I'm not trying to belittle it.

I understand why people think that crossing days off a calendar is the solution to changing the habit, because we are led to believe that alcohol is the problem. So then obviously, the solution is to remove the problem, to remove alcohol, to get days under your belt not drinking. But the problem isn't alcohol. And the problem by the way also isn't you.

People hear me say the problem isn't alcohol and they think, "Yeah, well I'm the problem." No, the problem is not alcohol and the problem is not you. You're the solution. The problem is a lack of understanding about why you reach for that drink in the first place and you reach for it again and again, and a lack of understanding when it comes to managing your desire and your deprivation.

Ep #188: Milestones

This is not what we're taught. We're not taught any of this. We are taught that the way out of a problem like drinking too much or really any problem of overconsumption, eating too much, spending too much is to get days under your belt of not doing the thing. This is so widely accepted and unfortunately, it is very, very, very wrong.

So here's the thing; will not drinking give your liver and your body a break? Sure, absolutely. Will it benefit your health? Of course. Will it change the habit? No, it will not. Because habit change isn't about saying no. It's about what you do when you say no. Habit change is about learning how to manage your brain's reward system, and not drinking just teaches you to say no, usually with willpower.

And willpower just reinforces that alcohol has power because when you use willpower, you have to grit your teeth and it takes all this energy. You use all this strength in order to say no, but you don't need to use energy or strength to say no when you understand that alcohol has no power. It is powerless.

Believing that it does ignores the power that you have. Saying no won't teach you how your brain works or how to manage the reward system inside of it. How to use your higher brain to manage your more primitive lower brain.

Now listen, I recommend taking a bare minimum of a 30-day break from drinking when you're getting started because if you're constantly cleaning up from the night before, it's going to be really hard to learn the skill of managing your mind. It's going to be hard to learn any skill when your body and your mind are constantly trying to deal with what happened last night.

And this is true if you had a bottle to drink, but you know what, it's also true if you just had a glass of wine. Because no matter what, alcohol consumption is going to mess up your neurotransmitters. It's going to throw things a little out of whack.

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

Ep #188: Milestones

So taking a break at first is about giving yourself the space and the time and the clarity so that you can actually start to learn what I teach here, learn about the think-feel-act cycle not just as a concept, but how to apply it.

Now, you do also get the benefits of seeing how you feel without alcohol in your system, and I think that can be really important, kind of as a reset button. But you cannot expect that crossing days off a calendar is going to magically change the habit. This is so key for you to understand.

You have to start shifting what your milestones are about. If your milestones are always about the calendar, you're missing the big picture here. And you know, we're at a pretty big milestone within the Take A Break program.

So I launched the 30-day challenge last September, September 2019. We have our first group of women who started September of 2019 with a 30-day challenge and then who continued on to do the advanced level work every month. They are about to reach their one-year anniversary.

But it's not a one-year anniversary of not drinking. It's a one-year anniversary of doing the work of learning how to manage your mind. Now, some of them haven't had a drink for almost a year. Some of them have reintroduced alcohol along the way and they're drinking it more mindfully now.

But the alcohol consumption is not what is important. That's not what we focus on. What's important is committing to doing the work, to really see that if you want to change the habit, you have to really master the concepts that I teach. If you want to change your relationship with alcohol, you have to understand why you currently have the relationship that you have with alcohol.

Ep #188: Milestones

A lot of people don't even like to think that they're in relationship with alcohol, but the fact of the matter is you are. But this work is so much bigger than that because it's about learning how to change your relationship with food, learning how to change your relationship with technology and your phone and screens. It's about changing your relationship with your partner and your friends and your body. Really everything in life.

Learning how to manage your mind is about creating the life that you want. That's why I always tell people that learning how to change your relationship with alcohol is the stepping stone to just learning how to have a better life. So often people really feel saddled. They really feel like, god, why do I have to deal with this? Why is this my problem? Why can't I drink like everyone else?

I know I really felt like this. I didn't understand that I was being given this gift. That the fact that I had to learn how to manage my mind in this area, that was a skill that I was going to be able to take to every aspect of my life. And I'm so unbelievably proud of these women who are about to hit their one-year anniversary because they've been committed to transformation.

Even though they were scared, even though they had doubts, even though they were not sure if it was going to work for them, they stuck with it. So their milestone isn't about not drinking or saying no. It's about who they've become in the process of learning why they were reaching for a drink in the first place, why they were going back for more, and then deciding, hey, what's the relationship I want to have with alcohol? How can I decide that for myself and then go start to create it?

But I want to tell you something else when it comes to milestones that really, I've been thinking a lot over the past couple days and it really is kind of wild. So we have been doing a real in-depth look at the entire program. So not just the 30-day challenge but the entire year-long program that I have.

Ep #188: Milestones

Because we've had thousands of people go through it since last September. Some people have stayed on just for 30 days, some of them three months, others have been sick so we have this group of women who are about to hit their one-year mark. And my team has compiled all of the suggestions, all of the feedback we've gotten from every participant because more than anything, I want to create an experience that is intuitive for people, that's empowering, but also more importantly, an experience that's really transformative.

And so we've been working on implementing all of these suggestions, all of this feedback. I'm so excited for the 2.0 version of the Take A Break challenge to launch. And I've been going through everything. I've been going through the 30-day challenge, I've been going through all the advanced classes, and as I was doing it, and also, as I was in the process of packing up my life, it really hit me that I dreamt this all up a long time ago.

And now it is here and it's all come to life. It's real. And when I say a long time ago, I'm not talking about a couple years ago. I'm talking about eight years ago, before I was a coach, before I had a business, before I had a podcast, when I couldn't even envision any of those things being true about me.

Eight years ago, I was living in New York City, I was trying to figure out why I had this screwed up relationship with alcohol. I was on my own journey, and I had just learned about the think-feel-act cycle. It was brand new for me.

And I was taking a different kind of break from drinking than I had in the past because in the past, what would happen is I'd wake up after a night of drinking too much and I'd be in a full-blown shame spiral. And I would tell myself, "Oh my god, I'm never going to do that again." And then I would focus on the calendar and crossing days off.

Ep #188: Milestones

And I would feel healthier and I would feel virtuous, which by the way is a problem. I talk about this a lot, but I was feeling virtuous because I would tell myself, “Oh Rachel, you’re being so good.” But then after a while, that would get very old and I’d want to be bad, or I’d tell myself, “You’re not having as much fun or you’re isolating or you’re lying to people about not drinking.”

And I would go back, and it was like the habit picked up right where it left off. But eight years ago, after doing this flip-flopping so many times and focusing on the calendar so many times, I decided there really has to be another way.

So I promised myself that I was going to take a break from drinking that wasn’t focused on the calendar. I was really going to focus on learning. I was going to focus on learning how not to need a drink to relax or open up or connect. I was going to learn how to be able to feel uninhibited without a drink, learn how to not need a buzz to feel confident or self-assured or sexy or assertive.

I wanted to learn about how my drinking was connected to my overeating and my quest to be perfect and always wanting to get approval and always wanting to get a gold star. I didn’t understand how they were connected, but there was a part of me who kind of knew that it had to be.

And I just knew deep down that what was going on, why I had this relationship that I had with alcohol, which just felt like I really wanted it, I had a lot of desire, I drank very fast, I knew that it really wasn’t about a love of fancy cocktails, which is what I had told myself for a long time.

Deep down, I knew that it had to be something else going on and I committed to this break, this different kind of break until I could learn things. So I didn’t tell myself I’m never going to drink again. I said you’re just going to focus on learning. You’re not going to focus on the calendar.

Ep #188: Milestones

And so really, I stopped looking at the calendar so I could focus on me. And I was about three months into that journey eight years ago, and I was showing after a Bikram yoga class. Now I'm going to tell you, I am not a yogi. I only did Bikram for a short while. But I was really invested in trying to open myself up to new experiences and connecting to my body in a new way.

And Bikram, I will tell you this, it pushed me way outside my comfort zone. I hated the heat. I hated staring at my body in the mirror for an hour. I hated being the worst person in the class. But part of me knew that doing something that felt very uncomfortable was actually helping me.

And I remember that I was taking a shower after class. I can still remember it. It's so crazy, I can still remember exactly which shower stall I was in and what it looked like. And in the shower, I had this epiphany. And I really don't say that lightly because when I saw epiphany, it felt like when this idea entered my mind, that a thousand light bulbs went off.

In that moment, I realized that my drinking, which at that point was something that I had been struggling with for over a decade, I realized that it wasn't about alcohol at all. I realized that it was about me. It was about something inside of me that I didn't yet understand.

And that I needed, but not just me, the world needed a different approach to looking at the problem of overdrinking and looking at this habit from a different perspective that wasn't 12 steps and it wasn't AA and it wasn't about trying to make up for your sins or declaring that you are powerless or acknowledging that you had defects of character.

We needed a new way. I needed a new way, but I knew that I wasn't the only one. And in that moment, I saw this entire year-long program in my mind's eye, which I know sounds really crazy, but I did. And I remember being so excited by it, and I didn't have anywhere to write it down.

Ep #188: Milestones

So I raced home after class so that I could outline it in a journal. I still have that journal. It is sitting right next to me right now. I'm looking at it. And at the top of the page, I wrote green recovery. And I called it green recovery because I knew that the process of change had to be sustainable, and that counting days is not sustainable.

It gets very tiring and very old after a while. I knew that the process of change, of deep change had to take into account your entire environment. You couldn't just look at the habit of drinking separate from every other part of your life. You had to see that everything was interconnected.

And more importantly, I knew that the process of change had to be holistic. You had to look at your whole being, your whole person because we aren't our separate parts. We are a whole being. The hand that picks up the glass is not separate from your brain or your thoughts or your feelings.

And so I wrote that at the top of the page, green recovery. And then underneath that, there were three subheadings. I wrote mind, body, and soul. And then underneath each of those subheadings, I outlined what I thought was needed.

So I wrote down learning about the think-feel-act cycle and learning how to answer excuses like I deserve it or screw it. Understanding how the brain is primed to catastrophize and see things in a negative light, but also learning that your brain is really powerful and can help you.

Learning about your brain's reward system, learning about neurotransmitters, learning about why it's so common to take alcohol out and then replace it with sugar or smoking or overworking or overexercising. Learning how to take risks and to reconnect with your body. Not just in terms of optimal health.

I had tried that. I had tried the route of I'm so healthy because I'm not drinking. It doesn't work. Learning how to reconnect with your body to have

Ep #188: Milestones

more pleasure. You need to have more pleasure, more enjoyment in your life. Learning how to reconnect with your body so that you actually like it. You like the container that you're in.

I will tell you, every time I did one of those Bikram yoga classes, I knew that I didn't really like the body that I was in. I certainly didn't like looking at it in a mirror for an hour. But more than that, learning how to have a relationship with yourself that was healthy and relationships with other people and your friends and your partner and your family that were healthy.

And learning about mindfulness. Learning how to be present with yourself and what you are doing instead of letting your lower brain take over and just have you on autopilot. Because that's how I often felt, like I was on autopilot with drinking and food and I was on autopilot with so much in my life.

I wrote this all down eight years ago. And it really - it kind of gives me chills just thinking about it. I wrote down everything that I've created, but I wrote it down eight years ago and I put it away because it was 2012. I wasn't a life coach. I didn't know how I would actually make this happen. I was working at a human rights organization.

I was on the road all the time. I was traveling around the world. I had this idea that kind of made my brain explode, but I had no clue how to make it a reality. I had no clue that I was even capable of making this a reality. But I held on to that notebook.

And when I was going through my office for the move, I came across it again and I remembered what was in it. I remembered that I had sketched out the entire Take A Break program eight years earlier. Everything that had come to me in the shower had been fully realized.

Because here we are nearing the one-year anniversary of this program and the entire thing is there. Everything that I teach, it's not just about counting

Ep #188: Milestones

days. It's about understanding your mind and your body and your whole being in a new way. And it is so crazy as I have been going through the entire program, not just the 30-day challenge but all the advanced classes and to realize that that idea that I had has fully come to life.

Because you don't need to count days. Counting days is not going to help you understand why it is you're numbing. That's one of the very first advanced concepts that people work on. Why are you numbing? You cannot change your drinking if you do not change the underlying habit of how you're using things to avoid how you feel.

And it doesn't matter if it's alcohol or food or work or organizing. I don't care what it is. People will find so many different ways to numb. You have to learn how to develop a new way to relate to your emotions or you will always look for some sort of way to escape. And PS, you can't escape them.

And if you believe that you can, if you believe that you can escape them, what you're doing will always feel kind of compulsive. You cannot cross days off a calendar to learn how to conquer stress and overwhelm. That's the second advanced class. Stress and overwhelm fuel the habit. It is why there has been an uptick in alcohol consumption during this pandemic.

If you don't learn how to deal with stress and overwhelm, you will keep searching for ways to try to take the edge off, and the truth is you don't need to take the edge off because you are so much more capable, you have so much more capacity to solve any problem before you. You just don't have the tools yet. No one's shown you how you can actually harness your brain to work for you rather than against you.

You don't need to count days or cross days off a calendar. What you need to do is cultivate pleasure. You have got to have more pleasure in your life. I know that I am like a broken record about this but it's so important. I'm not talking about instant gratification. I'm not talking about the false pleasures

Ep #188: Milestones

that mess with your brain's reward system. I'm talking about true pleasures that don't create any negative consequences.

And if right now, if you hear me say that and you can't even think of what one of those might be for you, that is something you need to pay attention to. If your life isn't enjoyable, if you don't have lots of pleasure in it, the process of change will never stick. It will never be sustainable.

This is something that I have seen in my own life. I used to believe that not drinking, not indulging in whatever I wanted to eat meant that I would always be deprived. But now here I am and I realize, oh my god, I have so much more pleasure in my life. And that pleasure isn't the type that always has me going back for more, and it isn't the type that creates negative consequences.

You don't need to count days. You don't need to cross days off a calendar. You need to reconnect with your body. Because listen, you cannot change your relationship with alcohol and end the cycle of numbing if you're constantly at war with your physical self.

And what I mean by that, if you're disappointed by your body, if you don't like looking at it, if you don't like feeling it, if you feel uncomfortable in it, if you feel disappointed or frustrated by your body, that's a problem. Because your physical container is your home. And if it doesn't feel like home and PS, it did not feel like home for me. It felt like something I wanted to change and fix and alter and get out of.

If it feels like a burden, then you will always be looking for ways to escape. Counting days, crossing days off a calendar is not going to help you make peace with food. People treat overdrinking and overeating as if they're these two separate things, when in truth, so many of the thought patterns connected to desire and deprivation and comfort that influence your current relationship with alcohol originated with food.

Ep #188: Milestones

I see this time and time again with so many of the people that I work with. If you don't feel in control around food, you're never going to feel in control around alcohol and vice versa. It's so important not to separate these two things out.

You don't need to count days or cross days off a calendar. You need to build healthy relationships in your life because when you put other people's happiness and other people's wants and needs and desires ahead of your own, it's always going to show up in your relationship with alcohol. Always.

Because when people say to you, "Oh, don't make me drink alone," or, "You're no fun when you don't drink," you will always cave unless you learn why it is you've been prioritizing their wants and their needs, rather than what is best for you.

You need to create more confidence. This is one of the advanced classes. This one is so key because so often people will cross so many days off a calendar. I remember when I was 22, I got almost an entire year of not drinking. I didn't feel one bit more confident.

I didn't feel more confident around alcohol because not drinking doesn't create confidence. Only challenging yourself, putting yourself out there, stepping outside of your comfort zone, that's the thing that creates more confidence.

You don't need to count days. You need to learn how to own the clock. I see this all the time with my clients. I experienced it myself. When you feel like you're at the mercy of the clock, that you never have enough time and you're always rushing and there's so much to do, you're going to end your day looking for relief. You're going to get to Friday looking for relief.

You have to learn how to take ownership over time and how you spend it instead of chasing after it or trying to escape the present moment. This is true also with boredom. If you feel like you're at the mercy of the clock, not

Ep #188: Milestones

just rushing around, sometimes it's like, nothing to do, I'm so bored. Taking ownership of your time, how you use it, what you think about it is so key to changing the habit.

And I'll tell you this; certainly crossing days off a calendar is not going to help you release shame and regret. If anything, the shame and regret that you harbor about your past, about the time you spent drinking, about the things that you did or said while you were intoxicated, those things are only going to haunt you unless you learn why you're holding on to this pain and you are holding on to it for a reason right now.

And here's the other thing that I see happen. You will try to use not drinking or try to use sobriety to prove that you're good now in an attempt to make up for being bad in the past. When you're caught in that dynamic of, oh, now I'm good. I was bad but now I'm good, it never feels good. It doesn't work. That is not how you start to let go of any kind of shame or regret that you have.

Because here's what I'm going to tell you. You weren't bad. I don't care what you did. I don't care how much you drank. I don't care what you said. You weren't bad. You were just a human that didn't understand the think-feel-act cycle. Didn't understand the reward system in your brain because nobody ever gave you the tools.

Listen, crossing days off a calendar isn't going to teach you how to take care of yourself physically or mentally, and it certainly is not going to help unlock a new you. Because that's what I want for you. That's what I wanted for myself is how not to be caught up in why can't I figure this out, why can't I figure out why I'm drinking too much, why can't I figure out why I eat too much, why can't I figure out why I feel kind of compulsive sometimes.

That's what I want. The deep work of really learning how to manage your mind, learning how to change your thought patterns. You have to do that,

Ep #188: Milestones

otherwise you'll just keep repeating the same thought patterns over and over, with or without alcohol.

You have something unique and amazing inside of you, and that something, whatever it is, it cannot come to the surface if you are spending so much mental energy trying to fix yourself or fix your drinking or fix your eating or fix whatever it is in your life that right now you think is the problem.

You don't need fixing. You just need to harness the power of your own mind. The women who are about to complete the year-long work, these are all of the things that they have worked on. They have worked on the entire picture of themselves. That is their milestone.

The new relationship they have created with themselves. So please, please, please do me this favor. Throw away the calendar. The calendar is not the secret. Counting days is not the milestone that you should be focused on. The milestone that you should be focused on is you. Your relationship with you. Your ability to manage your mind and your urges and your desire and your deprivation and any emotion that comes up for you.

Focus on the transformation that you can create for yourself and your life. Because you have everything inside of you to change. Everything that you need, it's all there. You just need to unlock it. And when you do, who knows what you will jot down in your own journal? Who knows what idea will come to the surface that will change your life and change other people's lives?

That's what I want for you. That is the milestone that I want you to focus on. It's not about the calendar. 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

Ep #188: Milestones

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.