

Ep #210: Dreaming about Drinking



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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 210.

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 dreams today, specifically dreams where you've been drinking. And what most people make these types of dreams mean and why I think they're wrong and why I think this can get in the way of changing the habit.

Now, I've never talked about this on the podcast before but I watch it come up with my clients in *Take A Break* all the time. So they start taking a break from drinking in order to learn about the habit so that they can change it and change their desire and they're doing really well. For some of them it's the first time that they can remember having two days or maybe two weeks without a drink. And then bam, all of a sudden they have a dream one night about drinking in the middle of their break and it really freaks them out.

And they start to question, hey, why am I dreaming about wanting to drink or getting drunk, or hiding from people that I have been drinking, or embarrassing myself when drunk? What is going on here in my dream life? Now, the good news is that because they're doing this work with us and the challenge we can help them address this right away.

It doesn't derail their progress because we can show them, hey, these dreams that you're having about drinking and about the habit. They may be unsettling or upsetting for you but they can actually be quite helpful as long as you don't make it mean that dreaming about drinking is a sign that you have a serious problem if you're trying to change the habit, or a sign that

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your desire is never going to subside. Or, and I think this piece is really important, it's not a sign that you're about to relapse.

And just as a side note I do want to explain that I really don't like the word 'relapse'. I don't think it's helpful. You have heard me talk on the podcast before about a lot of words in this space that I don't like and I don't use, like abstinence and sobriety, relapse is one of them. And I think that this idea of relapse is why we're so confused about the habit and how it works and how to change it. Because if you just look at the word itself, relapse suggests a deterioration in health, so what it means is okay, so you were doing well and then you had this setback.

And in some cases I think the word is really appropriate especially in the disease context. But you probably know by now if you're listening to me that I don't think that drinking too much is a disease. So for example if someone's getting cancer treatment and their scans show that they are doing well month after month and then suddenly the cancer spreads to another part of their body, well, then I think that makes sense to call it a relapse because your health was improving and then your health deteriorated.

But let me be clear, this is not how a habit works, but despite that, people use the word 'relapse' all the time with alcohol and drugs. And what they mean by relapse in that context is okay, so I was saying no to alcohol, I was saying no to drugs and then I relapsed by saying yes. And I want you to think about these two different scenarios because it's not like you say no to cancer and then you relapse because you suddenly said yes to cancer.

Whether or not a disease comes back has nothing to do with choice and this is really the problem of putting addiction in the domain of disease because I think it's like trying to force a square peg into a round hole. It sort of kind of maybe fits but not without a lot of force, not without a lot of shoving. When you drink after a period of not drinking it's not about your

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health deteriorating, nothing went rogue in your body. In fact it's not even a setback. It can actually be an opportunity if you know how to use it as one.

I don't think that most people will say that cancer spreading is an opportunity. But with a habit like drinking, saying yes to a drink when you're on a break, it can be an opportunity to learn and grow, and understand how the habit works because saying yes to a drink can reveal a part of the habit that was unconscious, or a part that you hadn't yet developed the awareness to see. It can also reveal a skill that maybe you need to learn or you have to practice using.

So maybe for example you're really good at not drinking when you're by yourself but then all of a sudden you're out with a group of people and you find yourself drinking. Now, you didn't deteriorate, nothing happened to your health, you didn't have a setback, you uncovered a part of the habit that needs work. Perhaps you are used to using a drink and using a buzz to open up and become more talkative, and without it you kind of struggle to figure out how to do that.

Now, the opposite can also be true, maybe you're fine not drinking when you're with people and fine not drinking when you're keeping yourself busy, but then one night you don't have anything to do, you don't have any plans and you decide to drink. Again, I don't think that's a relapse. It's not a setback. It's revealing something that needs your attention. It's revealing something that needs work. Maybe you need more practice managing boredom or loneliness instead of trying to drink over these emotions.

So this is all to say I don't like the word 'relapse'. And I don't think it's helpful in this context. And I don't think that dreaming about drinking is something to be feared or a sign that something bad can happen. But I do think that you do know how to handle these sorts of dreams because from my experience, and I've had these dreams many times myself, and from the experience of my clients, these dreams can feel very, very real. And you know this is true with all of your dreams.

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Sometimes we wake-up from a dream and we wake-up and it's like we have to check back in with reality and think wait, did that just happen? Did I dream it? You may even find yourself going about your day and only realize much later on after waking up that hey, what I thought happened in real life, it actually only happened in my dream life. This is true for all dreams, not just dreams about drinking. But I really do think that people know how to handle these sorts of dreams, because they can feel so real. People will say, "I swear that I could taste the alcohol or I could smell it."

Or you might wake-up and think, wait; did I get drunk last night? And then immediately start to feel shame. You might have felt inebriated in your dream. You might have noticed that you had trouble coordinating your movements. You were stumbling or you had blurry vision, you might wake-up sweaty with your heart pounding. The dream can feel real because you may have had an emotional experience during the dream.

So then the thing for everyone, for all of you listening is that you really have to know then how do I handle these moments? Because when I have this kind of high end emotional experience I need to be able to know how can I use this to serve me and not what most people do which is immediately make it mean something has gone wrong, something bad happened. This is what I hear over and over again.

And by the way, I used to do this too. So I would have a dream about drinking or getting drunk, I would have this around cigarettes too by the way, I've talked about this on the podcast. I used to be a smoker. And I would think to myself, what the heck, Rachel, I thought I moved on. I thought I did all this hard work and then what am I doing? I'm back in my dream world getting drunk or smoking, what's going on here?

Sometimes I felt like it was a sign I was going to drink again, that some part of me deep inside my brain was trying to send me a message and say like, "Hey, you're at risk, pay attention." I worried sometimes that it secretly meant that I wanted to drink, that I wasn't committed to this work. That I

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was never going to change my desire. And sometimes I would just feel really defeated. I don't want to be thinking about this in my dream world. I'm thinking about this enough during the day, I don't want to be thinking about it when I'm asleep.

But I want to suggest to you that while it might be very natural to make these kinds of dreams mean something negative, it doesn't have to be this way. You can feel encouraged by them. You can feel optimistic by them. Really when you have dreams about your drinking it can be a good thing. You can make it mean that it's a sign your brain is moving in the right direction. You can make it mean that your brain is trying to figure out how the habit works. Now, unfortunately that's not what most of us do, I know I didn't.

The first time that I took a break I was 22 years old. I had a dream a couple of weeks after that break and I still have a note of it in my diary. I've held onto that diary all these years. And I was rereading what I wrote before recording this podcast. And it's so telling because I was so freaked out. I wrote about being really scared that what happened in my dream, that getting drunk and not remembering the night, I was really scared that that was a sign of what was to come.

Now, I also have to laugh when I read this diary entry that I wrote because I also described that part of the dream had nothing to do with drinking, it was about me being asked to be in a play and that at the last minute I backed out of the play and I didn't tell the director. And there was no part of me that was like, well, that's a sign that I'm going to be a really flaky actress. But there was a huge part of me that worried that the drinking in my dream meant that I couldn't let my guard down, that I was really at risk, that this was a warning sign of something really deep inside of me.

And I think that the reason that so many of us react very negatively to these types of dreams is because we still subscribe to this very outdated theory about what dreams mean. So Freud believed that dreams had a hidden

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meaning. So your dreams contain this kind of repressed wish or desire, that what you were dreaming about was all about what your unconscious wanted. So if you're dreaming about drinking, then you must really want to be drinking.

Now, the problem is that science has moved on from Vienna in the 1890s when Freud was coming up with all this idea. So people have started to look at the evolutionary purpose of dreams. Why did humans evolve to have dreams, what is the purpose? And many people believe that dreams actually help humans solve problems.

Now, I remember having this experience my first year of college, I was taking a calculus class, I was really struggling to figure out my homework one afternoon and I was frustrated, and it was the afternoon so I took a nap. And while I was asleep I dreamt about the problem set. I dreamt how to solve it. And sure enough I woke-up and I used the information from my dream to solve the problem. And I remember at the time thinking, God, that's weird, I've never done anything like that before.

But then I didn't go on to then tell myself, "Hey, Rachel, dreams are here to help you solve problems." No, I went right back to thinking that dreams were like a harbinger of doom. And if I dreamt about an ex boyfriend it meant that I wasn't over him. And if I dreamt about forgetting an important homework assignment or test, it meant that something bad was going to happen in that class. And if I dreamt about getting drunk it meant that I really wanted to drink.

So I assigned all this meaning to my dreams that simply didn't need to be assigned to them, instead of just saying, "Hey, maybe my brain is trying to solve a problem." And if it's trying to solve a problem what problem might it be trying to solve? I've said this before, your brain is a perpetual problem solving machine and I love thinking about my brain in this way. I love thinking about a brain inside of me that loves to solve problems. And it's

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going to try to solve problems when I'm awake and it's going to try to solve problems when I'm asleep.

And when I'm asleep it can solve problems in a place that's not so logical, it can access a lot of out of the box thinking. So it's not just me that thinks that, hey, dreams might have a purpose here. Researchers have demonstrated the problem solving function of dreaming.

So I read about this really fascinating study where they asked college students to pick a homework problem to solve in a dream, much like what happened for me in college. And they instructed the students to think about the problem each night before they went to bed. And at the end of the week, this is what was so interesting for me; half of the students had a dream about the problem in question. So half of them, just by thinking about the problem before they went to bed, they had a dream about the problem.

And then here's where it gets even more wild, a quarter of those students had a dream that contained the answer that they were looking for. And I will tell you, I love taking this idea and applying it to your drinking. Could it be that if my brain is dreaming about drinking that it's trying to solve a problem?

Could it be that it's trying to help me figure out how to change the habit? And if so, if that's the case, if it's not about a warning sign or some deep desire, or a sign that you're not truly committed, or that you have to never let your guard down. Could it then be, hey, what problem is it trying to help me figure out?

I want you to really think about that, what is the problem that you struggle with when it comes to changing the habit? Do you just struggle because you just love the taste too much? Do you find it hard to disappoint people when you say no? Do you find it difficult to turn down a drink when you're

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bored or you're lonely, what's the problem connected to your specific situation? And what if your brain is trying to help you solve it?

And what if it could even help you solve it in your dream life? What if you just gave the brain a problem to chew on when you are dreaming? And conversely, even if you don't do that on purpose, if you end up dreaming about drinking when you're trying to change the habit, what might that dream be trying to help you solve? You don't have to make it be a warning sign. You don't have to make it mean that you need to be on high alert. You don't have to make it mean that your desire's never going to go away or that you're not committed.

You can just ask yourself, what might this dream be trying to help me solve? Because this is what is so powerful is switching to hey, maybe my brain is on my side. Maybe my brain is working for me, not against me. Now, I did not feel like that when I was stuck in the habit. I felt like my brain was always working against me. Why did I have all this desire? Why did I struggle to say no? Why did I seem to drink more than my friends?

I really felt like I was often at odds with my brain. And I know that a lot of you listening really can relate to that. But what if we can just turn this all around, my brain is on my side, it's always trying to solve problems, it's always trying to help me. So maybe it's trying to help me solve the problem of the habit. Maybe it's trying to help me see the area where I need more work or more practice.

I look back at that very first dream that I had about drinking and I think, oh, as I read through that entry, I think oh my gosh, my brain may have just been trying to help me solve what for me as a 22 year old was my biggest problem which is how do I say no when everyone around me was saying yes. Because that's what that dream was about, it was about being out with friends and they were all drinking and then I started drinking too.

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That was my biggest challenge at 22. I didn't want to stand out. I didn't want to be different. I didn't want anyone to question my choices. I just wanted to blend in. I wanted to do what everyone else was doing. What if I had, had all of the knowledge from today's episode and just said, "That's where I need more work. That's where my deeper work lies. How do I learn how to be comfortable in the choice that I'm making regardless of what other people decide?"

And this really is I think what people miss such a huge opportunity to do if they have a dream about drinking. And really honestly, we can do this with all sorts of dreams, it doesn't just apply here. Instead of making it mean something negative that you haven't moved on, that it's a message from the deep that you're never going to change.

Instead of waking up and feeling defeated and ashamed, what if the total opposite is true and it's here to help you, could it be that your brain is working on solving a problem? And if so, what do you think that problem is that your brain is trying to figure out? I really think that this tiny shift for all of you out there who have had an unsettling or an upsetting dream about drinking or the habit, I really think that this tiny shift can make such a tremendous difference. So just try that.

And you might want to try what these researchers did. You might want to say, "Hey, what is my current problem that I'm struggling to figure out with drinking?" Spend a minute or two thinking about it before you go to bed at night and see what your brain comes up with. The worst that will happen is that you'll have a weird dream.

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

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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.