

Ep #212: Alcohol and Sex



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Rachel Hart

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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're going to talk about sex today, specifically the impact of alcohol on your sex life and what happens to your sex life, what happens to intimacy when you start to change your relationship with alcohol. I think this is such an important issue and I think that it's something that is so widely misunderstood. So, culturally there is a widespread idea that alcohol is an aphrodisiac, it's something that increases sexual desire and boosts your libido and it leads to better less inhibited sex. That was certainly my experience, that's what I believed for a very long time.

And the idea of sober sex where I was not buzzed at all especially with someone that I had never had sex with before, I will tell you, that was not appealing for me because alcohol and my sex life were so entwined as they are for many people. And I've noticed these questions coming up, especially in the 30 day challenge, this idea of oh God, now I have to start having sober sex. If I'm taking a break from drinking, what does that mean for my sex life? And I really do think that the idea of sober sex, it's really a misnomer.

So this way of how we separate these two kinds of sex, so there's sex and then there's sober sex, as if alcohol is a given. And the truth is I think that alcohol and sex going hand-in-hand it really is a given for a lot of people, certainly I went off to college having not had sex. I started drinking and drinking coincided with me becoming sexually active.

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But I really do believe that this idea between there's sex and then there's the sober sex, and that sounds awkward and who wants to do that. I really do believe that it's a false distinction. Because let's face it, humans started having sex long before we started drinking. So I kind of think that there is sex which has been around for tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands of years and then there's buzzed, or drunk, or intoxicated sex. It really starts to flip the way that you see it when you make that distinction.

Now, I will tell you, when I was coming up with the idea for this podcast I was talking with a friend about it. And I was talking about how this idea of sober sex, and how it's so awkward, and it's weird. And she was like, "Oh my God, that's a thing, there's a thing that people can't have sex without being drunk?" And I was like, "Hey wait a minute, wait a minute here. How often do you open up a bottle of wine to set the mood? Or how often do you go out on a dinner date and drink a little and then come home and having sex?"

And she was a little defensive and she was saying, "Yeah, but Rachel, I'm not drunk when I'm doing it." And what I was trying to say to her is that's not really the point. The point is that for so many people, sex and alcohol go hand-in-hand.

And the fact of the matter is we're never taught anything about it. We're never taught the impact of alcohol on our sex life. In fact really at least here in the United States I think often not taught a lot about sex in general. I know that for me the education that I got around sex it really was kind of abstinence only education in the sense of here are all the bad things that will happen and by the way, you shouldn't be doing it.

So what I want you to know is I'm not here to moralize, I do not think that it is bad or wrong to incorporate alcohol or any substance for that matter, into your sex life. And on the flipside I don't think it's more virtuous or pure to abstain from alcohol or any type of substances when you have sex. The point is that most people just don't give it a lot of thought. That we're just

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not taught about it, we're not taught about how alcohol and sex coincide and what happens when we bring them together.

We have very little understanding of how alcohol affects our body during sex or how alcohol impacts our experience of sex and intimacy before, during and after. And that's really what I just want to talk to you about today. Now, one thing that I do want to note, I'm not talking about – on this episode I'm not talking about alcohol, and sex, and consent, which of course is a hugely important, very thorny issue. Alcohol is often involved in sexual assault, sexual coercion, sexual pressure. It's something that too many women, too many men have experience with, myself included.

And I just think it's important that we're not going to be talking about that today. What I want to talk about today is simply the role that alcohol is playing in consensual sex. So there are many assumptions about alcohol and sex. But I think that three of them are alcohol allows for more intimacy, alcohol increases sexual desire and boosts libido, and alcohol leads to better sex.

And that's what I want to really start to unpack with you today. Again, there's no right or wrong here, there's no good or bad. I just want you to start to think about what role has alcohol played in my own sex life and have I spent time thinking about that? And is that impacting me when I start to think about if I want to change my relationship with alcohol, what is that going to mean in the bedroom?

So let's look at the first one, alcohol creates intimacy. So I was teaching a class recently and someone said, "After a couple of glasses of wine I'm more open to cuddling and snuggling with my partner and I don't want to lose that." And the question is, is that intimacy? Because you can be close to someone, two bodies can literally be more than close. They can be inside one another. That doesn't mean that you're intimate. That doesn't mean that you're experiencing intimacy. You can have sex with someone and feel far away, and distant, and distracted.

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You can have sex and you can be kind of counting down the minutes or seconds until it's over. You can have sex and you cannot even like the person. Sex does not equal intimacy. Now, alcohol can lead to having more sex, but having more sex, even having more cuddling, that doesn't lead to intimacy because physical closeness is not intimacy. It's not the same thing. Intimacy is how close do I feel to this person? How seen do I feel by this other person? How willing am I to be vulnerable with this other person?

Those are questions to examine to ask yourself, is this intimacy, am I experiencing intimacy right now? Now, listen, I really do want to be clear on this point. I'm not saying that sex should always be an intimate experience, or that anonymous one night stands are somehow a bad thing. I just think it's important for all of us to take a look and say, "If I want more intimacy in my sex life, is alcohol or sex, for that matter, actually creating that? If I'm seeking intimacy do I feel closer to the person the next day or do I still feel like there's a distance between us?"

And I think the problem with this idea that alcohol just leads to intimacy is often what happens afterwards when we use alcohol as a way to be physically close to someone else. Often what happens in the aftermath is that your brain will use the fact that you were drinking, or they were drinking, or both of you were drinking as a way to delegitimize what happened. I know I used to do this all the time. So I would say to myself, "Oh well, we only had sex because alcohol was involved. This person was only interested in me because we were drinking."

My brain would start to use alcohol to discount what had happened, to explain it away. And so it's like the presence of alcohol a lot of times doesn't allow people to trust that what happened was real. And I will tell you, there is nothing worse than waking up and thinking that person only had sex with me because we were drinking. So this is something that I just want you to start to consider.

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If you have thought, okay, alcohol leads to more intimacy for me, it's important just to consider what actually is intimacy? What am I specifically looking for and what happens when alcohol is involved? Am I using the presence of alcohol the next day to kind of say, "Well, that only happened because we were drinking. Am I even saying that I want more intimacy but then not questioning what is the intimacy that I want? Is it to be seen? Is it to feel close? Is it to be able to feel like I can be vulnerable with this other person? And is alcohol actually creating that for me?

Because part of this is the idea that alcohol increases sexual desire and boosts libido. This is one of the other conceptions that we have around the role of alcohol and sex is that it just increases desire.

And the way that I like to think about this and how I teach this with people who are doing the work inside the Take a Break challenge, I like people to consider that a lot of times your sexual desire is already there. Alcohol isn't boosting it, it's revealing it. And the way that it is revealing it is by quieting the thoughts that are blocking it, thoughts like I don't like the way that I look, I feel fat, I'm not good at this, this is awkward, I don't know how to ask for what I want.

I don't know how to tell my partner that what they like isn't something that I really like, or what they're doing doesn't actually feel good because I don't want to hurt their feelings. It's so different when you approach it that way as opposed alcohol just is increasing or creating the sexual desire, it's boosting my libido to say, "Wait a minute, what if my desire's all there, it's just being blocked by all these thoughts?"

Because yes, alcohol, it does lower inhibitions, maybe after a couple of glasses of wine you feel more confident about your body, or more confident to make the first move, or more able to ask for what you want in bed. And listen, I think all of those are good things. I want to have sex where I feel good in my body and I feel good initiating, and where I feel really comfortable and good asking for what I want. But the question to consider

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right now is, is alcohol actually boosting my desire or is it temporarily quieting the thoughts that are blocking my desire?

And it's really important I think, and really instructive to kind of come at this question from that angle because if alcohol is boosting your desire, if it's increasing your libido then guess what? You need it. It becomes this thing that feels necessary. But if it's actually just quieting the thoughts that are blocking your desire then maybe your desire or your libido doesn't need boosting at all.

What if you already have plenty of desire but all these thoughts, I don't like the way that I look, I feel fat, this is awkward, I don't know how to speak up, I don't know how to ask for what I want, what if those thoughts are the real problem? Then you have such a different lens through which to view, hey, if I want to have more desire in my life how then am I going to create it? Do I need to have a drink or do I need to take a look at these thoughts and learn how to quiet them on my own? I think this is really important for women.

I think we are conditioned to believe that we have a lower sex drive and then it's just normal that women don't want sex as much as men. And listen, I do believe that everyone's sex drive is totally different. But I do also think that we need to question the ways that we are socialized to think about what sex is like for men and what sex is like for women.

Because honestly, if you didn't have all of these thoughts, judging your body and judging your preferences, or telling you that it's awkward to give your partner feedback, or instructions, then you know what? It would be a lot easier to tap the desire that is there. And you can lower your inhibitions all that you want but you're not ever going to actually change the thoughts that are inhibiting you if the way that you're doing this is by turning to opening a bottle of wine. They are still going to be there the next time that you go to have sex.

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Alcohol isn't actually helping you release your inhibitions. I want you to consider that, alcohol isn't actually helping you to release your inhibitions, they're still there. What's really powerful is to figure out how do I release my inhibitions instead of temporarily quieting them only for them to pop up the next time? I think most people assume that this isn't possible. I know that I thought that this wouldn't be possible, especially because we're not shown how. We're told instead, "Hey, drink this, have a drink, have a buzz, it will help you loosen up."

But just because your inhibitions were lowered in the moment doesn't mean that you've actually changed your inhibitions at all. And you know what? It doesn't mean that you're going to feel good about the sex that you had afterwards. And let's not forget it's not just your inhibitions that are being lowered, it's also the decisions that you're making about engaging in sex.

So when alcohol is in your system you're more likely to engage in riskier sex, so for example, maybe not using protection. You are more likely to have sex that you regret afterwards. Maybe that means you have sex with someone that you're like, you know what? In the light of day I probably wouldn't have chosen to do this. Or maybe you're more likely to have sex with someone or fool around with someone outside of your current relationship. So I think it's important to understand that all of that is being temporarily lowered.

And the last piece is this idea that alcohol leads to better sex. And it makes so much sense that people believe this. If we have bought into the idea that alcohol helps us be intimate, and it stokes our desire, and it lowers our inhibitions then of course we're going to assume that alcohol is going to lead to better sex. But you know what? Really the opposite is true. Sex is about so many things. Yes, it's how we reproduce as a species. But it's also about sensation, there is a reason why we like to orgasm, it feels good.

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But guess what happens when you drink? Alcohol dampens the sensation that you feel. And a lot of times I think that we only talk about this in terms of men. So we think about yeah, if a guy is drinking too much, maybe he's not going to be able to have an erection. Maybe he's not going to be able to ejaculate. But you know what? It doesn't just impact one gender. Alcohol dampens sensation for everyone.

Women are not immune to the dampening effects of alcohol on the body. And so for women that can mean reduced lubrication, it can mean decreased sensitivity and responsiveness in your genitals, which makes it harder to have an orgasm, and orgasms that are less intense. And so it really is kind of upending the ideas that we have been taught to believe about alcohol and sex and how alcohol helps sex. And that this idea of not drinking having 'sober sex' is going to be awkward and uncomfortable and weird and not fun.

I really want you to consider that sex without alcohol can be the opposite of everything that you have been taught to believe. That you can feel more intimacy because you don't wake-up thinking, hey, that only happened because we opened up a bottle of wine. You can feel more intimacy because instead of relying on a buzz, you're starting to rely on yourself to talk to the other person and actually engage in a conversation about sex, and the type of sex that you want to have, and what feels good for you.

Not involving alcohol in sex, it can actually lead to having fewer inhibitions because guess what happens? When you remove alcohol from the equation, when you're no longer relying on it to feel confident in your body, or confident for what you want, or confident to initiate, then suddenly you know what? You start to learn how to do these things.

You learn how to feel good in your body and feel good naked, and good asking for what you want, and good giving feedback to your partner. And I will tell you that will be uncomfortable at first, but it's so rewarding. It's so rewarding to know, hey you know what? I can engage in sex and feel good

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and ask for what I want and have this be a place where I can speak up, and I can feel confident. Because instead of always relying on a drink to set the mood as we say, or lower my inhibitions, I figured out how not to have inhibitions. Imagine that.

Imagine how powerful sex would be without inhibitions. I will tell you, it's amazing. And I also want you to consider that when alcohol isn't involved there is more opportunity for pleasure. There is more opportunity for sensation and to actually feel. Sensation is a huge part of why it feels good to have sex. If we're dampening sensation we're dampening our pleasure. I know that this seems so backwards because it really is not what we're taught. But the fact of the matter is that you want more responsiveness.

You want to feel more if you're interested in having as much pleasure as possible when you're having sex. All of this is just not a conversation that we have. And I think that that is such a disservice. It's such a disservice that so many of us learn often from a young age, often from the point at which we start having sex, we learn alcohol is going to help the process, it's going to make it easier. It's going to make it more fun.

And no one gives us this information so we accept these ideas that it creates more intimacy, and it's the way to set the mood, and it's the way to lower your inhibitions, and it's the way to have more fun, pleasurable sex, and it's a way to boost your libido. Except, what I want to just offer is that maybe none of that is true.

Again, please hear me that there's no right or wrong here. It is not a bad thing to involve alcohol or any substance in sex. It is not a better, more virtuous thing to abstain from alcohol or any substance from when you're having sex. It just is important for you to consider the role that you have told yourself, and taught your brain that alcohol plays in your sex life and why you may think you need it, why you may think it makes things easier, why you may think that it boosts your libido or creates more desire, and just to question, hey, maybe none of that is true.

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Maybe humans have always been having sex well before we learned how to harness the power of fermentation. So it's not sex and sober sex, it's actually sex and sex with substances. And neither of these things are good or bad, it's just important to decide hey, what do I want for me? What feels good for me? What kind of sex do I want to have? What kind of pleasure do I want available for me and how can I create that without relying on a drink to set the mood?

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.