

Ep #221: Drinking at a Young Age



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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 221.

Welcome to the *Take A Break* podcast with Rachel Hart. If you're an alcoholic or an addict, this is not the show for you. But if you are someone who has a highly functioning life, doing very well, but just drinking a bit too much and wants to take a break, then welcome to the show. Let's get started.

Well hello, everyone. we are talking today about what happens when you start drinking at a young age. Now, I work with so many people who worry, because they started drinking when they were in their teens, that they're never going to be able to change the habit, they're never going to lose their desire to drink, they're always going to feel out of control around alcohol.

And they believe this because they tell themselves, "Well, I started drinking when I was really young. And now that I'm learning about the brain, I realize that I was interfering with my brain's development and I messed up my brain in a way that I just feel like it's never going to be fixable."

And that's really what I want to talk to you about today because I know so many people feel this way, and you really don't need to. Now, you can go online and there are no shortage of warnings about the impact of alcohol on the developing brain.

And I'm not advocating for teenagers to start drinking. But if you right now are listening to this and you're 25 or 35 or 45 or 65 and you're feeling really hopeless or defeated because you're thinking, "Okay, well here I am with this habit and I started drinking when I was 12 or 14 or 16 and I'm never going to be able to figure this out. I've been drinking for too long," or, "I screwed up my brain because I started when I was so young," I just want you to know you don't need to feel this way.

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You are not a hopeless case. You have so much power to change the habit and create the relationship with alcohol that you want, that feels good for you. And I say this from experience because I started drinking regularly when I was 17 when I went to college.

So, I had tried alcohol when I was much, much younger. I'd even gotten drunk before. But alcohol really wasn't a regular part of my life until I was 17. And at that point, I got to college, I started drinking, and then pretty much was binge drinking every weekend.

I was drinking to get drunk. I wanted to have a good time. I wanted to have fun. I wanted to fit in. I wanted to forget about all my hang-ups and all my insecurities. And I'll tell you this. One to two drinks was not going to cut it. It was not going to get me to the place where I could forget about all of that.

Now, to be clear, alcohol does affect the brain differently depending on the age that you start drinking. So, I'm always talking on the podcast about the higher brain versus the lower brain and the fact that you really need to understand the difference between the two if you're going to start learning how to manage your mind around alcohol.

So, the part of you that sets goals and weighs pros and cons and thinks about tomorrow and your future, that's your higher brain. Your lower brain is very different. It's not focused on tomorrow. It's focused on right now. It's all about instinct and immediate gratification and doing things very easily without expending a lot of energy.

So, it's about doing things, taking action without a lot of conscious thought. That's your lower brain. And if you want to change the habit, you have to start learning, how can I use this higher brain, this part of me that cares about tomorrow and weighs the pros and cons and has judgment, how can I use that to really manage my lower brain that's just like, "No, I want what feels good right now and I want it to be easy."

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You can learn how to do that. But right now, if you find yourself drinking more than you want, what's happening is that your lower brain is running the show. Your lower brain is the part of you that is making decisions around alcohol. And that's not a good thing. It's not sustainable. And it's not going to get you to a place where you feel good about your drinking.

Now, teenagers don't have a fully developed higher brain. Their prefrontal cortex, the part of their brain that is responsible for judgment and decision-making and impulse control, that part of their brain doesn't finish developing until they're at least 25. Some people suggest maybe even later, maybe even 30.

But that time when your prefrontal cortex finally finishes developing, that is well after the point at which most people start drinking.

So, I want you to think about it. You've got alcohol, which is a substance that depresses your prefrontal cortex. It impairs your judgment and your decision-making. And then you mix that with a teenage brain that doesn't even have a fully developed prefrontal cortex.

So, yeah, when you mix a teenage brain with alcohol, you're going to get an increase in risky behavior. The teenage brain is less able to weigh negative consequences from drinking. It is less able to put the brakes on impulsive, risky, and dangerous behavior. And that's not a good thing.

Now, the problem however is that when people start doing the work inside the Take a Break Challenge or the start listening to the podcast and they start applying the think-feel-act cycle, so all of these tools that we're using to start really utilizing this tool that we have which is the human brain, it is a tool for you to utilize.

So, people start doing this and engaging their prefrontal cortex and engaging their higher brain. And for many people, this is really the absolute

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first time that they've actually even learned anything about the brain and how it works and how to manage it.

But the problem is, people start embarking on this work and they start to feel kind of hopeless or defeated because they think, "Okay, well no wonder this is so hard for me. I started drinking when I was 13. I screwed up this part of my brain that now I'm trying to utilize."

And it is so easy to find so many things online about the long-term consequences of repeated exposure to alcohol and developing brains. You do not have to go very deep into Google to find this.

So, you can find studies that say the earlier that you start drinking, the more likely you are to abuse alcohol and that drinking at an early age can have long-term effects on learning and memory.

Now, here's the thing. All of that is true. And I don't think it's a great idea for teenagers to start drinking. And I do think it can have a detrimental impact on the developing brain. But you know what's way worse? What's way worse is feeling helpless and hopeless and defeated because right now, today, as an adult you believe you can't change this habit because your brain is too screwed up because of what you did in the past.

It is way worse to feel like, "I don't know, I think I'm just going to be stuck with this habit forever. I just feel like I'm never going to have control. I'm always going to want alcohol too much. I'm never going to be able to change my relationship with it."

That is way worse in my mind. Because how you feel today about your ability to succeed and your ability to create change and your ability to change your relationship with alcohol, that's what is most important. And it is totally unnecessary for you to feel defeated or hopeless or helpless right now because of the age you started drinking.

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And here's the thing. Because I coach people on this a lot inside Take a Break. It sounds so logical to say, "You know, I really shouldn't have started drinking when I was 17 or 15 or 13..." or whatever age it was for you, "I really shouldn't have done it. It was a bad idea. I wish I hadn't been hanging out with those people. They were a bad influence on me. I wish someone would have warned me. I wish I would have known, or I could have known better, or that I could have waited to start drinking.

It sounds so smart and logical to think these thoughts. But these thoughts are often the real problem. These thoughts are what is actually leading you to feel helpless and hopeless and defeated. Because when you're thinking these thoughts, you're basically saying to yourself, "I wish I could change the past."

And you can't. None of us can. You're saying to yourself, what I did back then is creating a problem right now. But whatever age you started drinking at is not creating a problem for you right now. It's not the reason that you're feeling hopeless or defeated right now. That's not what's going on.

I really want you to hear me on this because, because it sounds so logical to think, "Oh I just wish I would have started later or I wouldn't have started at all if I hadn't been 13 when I picked up my first drink..." it sounds so logical to think that. But your brain will continually tell you that the age in which you started drinking is the problem. And this is wrong.

The problem is not the age at which you started drinking, the problem is what you are making that age mean, what you are making it mean that you started drinking when you were 15 on your ability to succeed today.

Because I promise you, you aren't making it mean anything good. You're probably making it mean this is going to be impossible or it's going to be harder for me or I'm going to have a harder time figuring this out or I might never figure it out, or that I screwed up my brain too much.

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And guess what? None of this is true. No matter the age that you started drinking, you can learn how to create change now. But not if you're feeling defeated, which is why you have to pay such close attention to what you make it mean about when you started.

I mean, really, if you want to see this in action, just ask yourself, "Okay, so how do I show up with my ability to change? How do I show up with drinking when I feel defeated and hopeless and helpless?"

This is where the think-feel-act cycle comes in. This is where we have to really understand that our actions don't just happen. It's how we're thinking and how we're feeling that leads to the decisions that we make, all decisions, including the decisions that we make around alcohol.

So, what are you doing? How are you showing up when you feel like, "My past is really the problem?" I can tell you what it used to look like for me. When I was feeling hopeless or helpless or defeated about my drinking, guess what I would do. I would drink.

I would throw my hands up and just be like, "Oh, screw it." I wasn't taking steps that would help me get out of the hole that I was in. Because in those moments, I believed that there wasn't a way out. So, I just got the shovel and dug myself in deeper because I thought, "I don't know, if I'm this messed up, I might as well feel good tonight."

These thoughts, "I shouldn't have started drinking when I was so young. I should have waited. I wish I had known. I wish I had been smarter." These thoughts lead to more drinking. And that. My friend, is the real problem. Not the age at which you started. What you're making the age at which you started mean about your ability to succeed today.

So yes, does drinking at a young age potentially impact the development of your prefrontal cortex? Of course. Does that matter right now when it come sot habit change? I would argue no.

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What matters right now is what you're telling yourself about what is possible for you and how you feel about your ability to succeed. The lie really is, "If only I hadn't started when I was so young. If only I had waited until I was 25 and I had a fully developed prefrontal cortex, this would all be so much easier for me."

That is the lie keeping you stuck. Because when you find yourself drinking more than you want, when you find that it's hard to say no or you find that you keep going back for more or reaching for that glass, even though you know it's not really serving you, you know what? It really doesn't matter if you started at 15 or 25 or 55.

The work that you have to do today in order to change the habit is the same. The work that you have to do today is to start practicing impulse control on purpose. And I'm not talking about willpower. I'm not talking about gritting your teeth. I'm not talking about avoiding or distracting yourself. I'm talking about learning how to say no to your urges in a sustainable way, learning how to breathe through an urge, learning how to practice curiosity with what's happening in your mind and what's happening in your body.

I don't care if you've never had a drop of alcohol before at the age of 30, I can pretty much guarantee that no one has taught you how to do this, no one has taught you how to practice impulse control in a way that wasn't just, "Have more discipline. Be stronger." That doesn't work.

So, no matter what age you started, learning how to do this, it is going to be challenging for your brain at first because it's a new skill. Not because there's anything wrong with your brain. Just like any new skill that we start to practice is always going to be challenging at first because our brain doesn't yet know how to do it.

We all start out from a deficit when it comes to learning how to manage our urges because no one ever showed us. And it's not like if you could go back in time and you never did drugs or you never did alcohol that your

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prefrontal cortex would be kind of perfectly preserved and would have developed in this pristine environment.

That's not true either because you live in a modern world. And all of us, we're all exposed to all these rewards that short circuit the brain in different ways. We've got phones and social media and screens. We've got Netflix and YouTube videos that just automatically start playing when the first one is over. We don't even have to press a button.

We've got highly processed food and supersize food that's loaded with sugar. We live in a world of on-demand shopping and on-demand porn and on-demand practically everything. So, all humans, we're all surrounded by way more immediate gratification and way more rewards and rewards that are stronger and more concentrated than the human brain was originally designed to manage.

But that does not mean that you can't learn how to adapt. That does not mean that you can't learn how to manage your brain in this environment if someone just gives you the right tools. Which that is what we're missing. We're missing the tools because this course isn't taught in school.

We get English and math and history and science. We don't get, "Hey, how do you manage your brain?" Even if you never touch a drop of alcohol in your entire life, the development of your higher brain, of your prefrontal cortex, it still would have been affected by the environment in which all of us live.

The reward circuitry in the brain which evolved hundreds of thousands of years ago, it's not meant for our modern world. And you know what? That's okay. It just means that we have to evolve, we have to direct our brain to start practicing new skills that we didn't need before because we didn't used to be surrounded in this world of so much abundance and so many rewards and such easy access. And you can learn how to do this.

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You have to, today, start practicing impulse control on purpose. We all need this skill. No matter if you have never had a drop of alcohol. No matter if you started drinking when you were 12. We all need to learn this skill. It's not willpower. It's not gritting your teeth. It's not avoidance. It's not distraction.

That's what most people think it is. But those are not sustainable. When you rely on those things as a way to have impulse control, guess what happens? You get tired. Eventually you're like, "I don't want to do this anymore. I don't want to hide out. I don't want to use all this energy to say no." And you give in.

The solution is different. It's really relaxing into an urge and discovering, "Hey, this is kind of harmless. The urge can't make me do anything. It's a little bit of restlessness in my body, but it's not a big deal. I can handle this."

When you relax into the urge, you start to see the default story that's running in your mind about it, that default story of like, "This is too much, too strong, it's so overwhelming, I have to say yes. I'll feel deprived. I hate feeling deprived."

You start to see that default story and you realize, "Hey, I can change the storyline because I never, ever, ever have to say yes to an urge." Learning how to do this is available to you because you have a human brain, because you have the ability to create a window into your mind and watch what's happening and observe your habits unfold from a distance.

Not only that, but your brain is equipped with something called neuroplasticity, which in its very simplest terms means your brain can constantly grow and evolve always. You always have that skill for your entire life.

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It's not just the domain of young people who can learn new things. You can do this just by exposing yourself to new experiences. Just by practicing new things.

Neuroplasticity, it's on your side when it comes to habit change. It can help you create new pathways in the brain. And that's a really good thing. Because we can't go back in time and change the age at which we started drinking. But you know what? We don't need to.

What we need to do right now is stop making it mean that we're never going to be able to succeed, that we're hopeless, or that we should have known better or that we should have waited or that it would have been easier if we had waited until I was 25. Who cares about what you did when you were 15? Let's talk about what you're doing today.

The thought, "I shouldn't have started so young," really, it's one of those sneaky ones because it really does sound so good. It sounds so smart and logical. But it's poison because it keeps you stuck in the habit because you feel defeated when you think it. You're more likely to just keep on going with the habit.

You're likely to look for evidence that you can't change and you'll always be in this place of tension and conflict. You'll always have your attention focused backwards on the past. And I don't want you looking backwards. I want you to look at the present moment and figuring out, "Hey, what do I need to do right now to create the change I want?"

So, really ask yourself, can I start to just look at the age at which I started drinking without so much judgment? Can I realize, "You know what? It doesn't actually have any bearing on my decisions today. It doesn't have any bearing on my ability to change this habit."

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What matter is, “How willing am I to keep showing up and keep practicing with my urges and keep trying to show up with them in a way that isn’t about discipline and willower and avoidance?”

Every single developing brain, every single one, it’s introduced to so many things – not just alcohol – that can leave an imprint on the developing brain. But that’s okay. You have the think-feel-act cycle, you have neuroplasticity on your side that can help you make new imprints.

And the idea that any of us would have this perfectly preserved development of our higher brain and prefrontal cortex if only we could have avoided these things, it just isn’t true.

We couldn’t have done it because that’s not the world that we’re alive in today. Learning impulse control is challenging for everyone. It takes practice for everyone. Just ask people who have never had a drop of liquor in their life but struggle with overeating.

Impulse control is something that we all have to learn. Does alcohol impact the teenage brain differently? Of course. Does it make you a hopeless case if you started drinking when you were young? Nope. Because you have two of the greatest tools at our disposal. You’ve got the think-feel-act cycle and you’ve got neuroplasticity.

And if you have these two things, you can create change. So, the next time you find yourself slipping into, “This would be so much easier if only I hadn’t started when I was so young...” just remember, that’s the lie.

The lie is that you could go back in time and change the age at which you started drinking and then it would magically be easier for you right now to say no. What’s going to make it easier for you to say no is to stop looking backwards and start focusing on what you can practice and what you can do right now to change the habit.

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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.