

# Ep #223: Why You Don't Need to Decide Never to Drink Again



## Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Rachel Hart**

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## Ep #223: Why You Don't Need to Decide Never to Drink Again

You are listening to the *Take A Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, episode 223.

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.

Hey everyone. So, today we're going to talk about deciding whether or not you should stop drinking for the rest of your life. I have a very different approach to this question. And partly because I think for so many people, that decision is really daunting. It's really scary. It sure was for me.

When I thought that I had to make a decision for the rest of my life, it kind of freaked me out. Which is, by the way, why I've never made this decision. I don't walk around saying, "Well, I promised myself that I would never drink again, or I'm swearing off alcohol for the rest of my life."

Ad this can seem kind of confusing and counter-intuitive for a lot of people. Loke, "Well, I don't get it. What are you doing then?" But I think that's because we have been sold this lie that in order to change, we have to decide what we're going to do forever. And I don't think that's true. So, this is what we're going to talk about today.

We're going to think about why exactly we have been told that we need to make a decision for the rest of our lives when it comes to alcohol. Why that decision – not just the decision whether or not you're going to do that, but just being in the place of wrestling with this decision can actually backfire and keep you stuck in the habit and what you should be deciding instead.

So, let's start first with why so many people think, if you struggle with your drinking, if you find that it's difficult to say no, if you wake up and you regret

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

## Ep #223: Why You Don't Need to Decide Never to Drink Again

what you did last night, then you need to decide that you're never drinking again.

Now, this is a message that we get from AA. And, of course, you've probably heard me talk about this before. You don't need to attend an AA meeting to be steeped in their messaging, to know all about the 12 steps.

AA has been around for almost 100 years and many of their ideas have really filtered into the societal narrative for how we talk about the problem of drinking too much.

So, for example, you may have heard about the idea that you need to hit rock bottom before you can change. I did an entire podcast on this. I do not think that that is true. You may be familiar with the idea that you need to admit that you're an alcoholic to yourself and everyone around you, the idea that some people are powerless over alcohol, that drinking too much is a disease, that in order to change, you need to make amends for your wrongs, the importance of counting days or collecting sobriety chips. And the idea that lifelong abstinence is the only solution.

All of these ideas come from AA. And I don't agree with any of them. Now, the question is, how did this happen? If you never attended a meeting, if you never set out to learn the 12 steps, how did it happen that you have absorbed so many of these ideas and now believe that they're true?

And I will tell you that it happens through a process called socialization. So, your brain is constantly learning and picking up messages about how the world works, even if you're not consciously aware that this is happening, it's happening.

So, the books that you read and the shows that you watch on TV and the comments that you hear from family and friends and strangers,

## Ep #223: Why You Don't Need to Decide Never to Drink Again

advertisements that you're bombarded with, all of this is teaching your brain what to think.

And since AA has been around for so long, it was founded during the Great Depression, there has been a lot of time for AA's ideas and their teachings to really become part of pop culture.

And it's really not a surprise when you consider that the 12<sup>th</sup> step of recovery in AA is to carry the message to others. So, when you subscribe to the 12 steps, step number 12 really puts forward that talking about AA and bringing this message to other people, it's part of the healing process.

So, it's no surprise that these messages have so saturated our world. Now, a while back, I actually taught a class all about AA and what I think that the get wrong about the habit of drinking. And when I was preparing for the class, I did a really quick – and I mean a quick, a 10-minute Google search, just to find TV shows that either feature a character who is in AA or a scene from an AA meeting or someone talking about 12 steps.

And I will tell you that that 10-minute search really did blow my mind because it seemed like, "Oh my god, AA is everywhere." I found it in Seinfeld, in The Simpsons, in Family Guy, in Gray's Anatomy, in West Wing, This Is Us, Girls, The Wire, House of Cards, Shameless. I can go on and on and on.

My husband and I just finished the show How to Get Away with Murder, and sure enough, partway through season three, Analise starts going to AA. We see characters and people all the time on our screens that are going through the 12 steps. So, it's really no surprise that we have adopted so many of these beliefs because it's not just happening in TV. It's movies and books and what you hear in the world around you.

## Ep #223: Why You Don't Need to Decide Never to Drink Again

So, you've absorbed their ideas from so many places. And one of those ideas is that the solution is lifelong abstinence.

Now, here's the thing. You and I can debate whether or not you think that that is true, whether or not people need to have lifelong abstinence from alcohol.

But I will tell you, I'm not interested in that debate. I really do feel like different people can believe different things. What I am interested in is how does that statement make you feel? When you believe that you have to make a decision to stop drinking for the rest of your life and that is the only solution, how does it make you feel?

Because what I teach here is all about the think-feel-act cycle. It's about paying attention to how our thoughts and our emotions and our behavior, they're all connected.

This work is not about telling you what you should think. It's about noticing how certain thoughts make you feel and how you show up in your life as a result. And in my experience, in my experience from working with thousands of people, the thought, "I need to stop drinking for the rest of my life," it often created a negative result.

Now, remember this. This is really important whenever you're doing work with the think-feel-act cycle. Different people react differently to the same thought. The same sentence does not play out exactly the same for every person.

So, I know people who have said, you know, "The moment that I decided to stop drinking for the rest of my life, that I was never going to touch it again, it was like freedom. It was like the chains came off and I experienced such a powerful, powerful moment of empowerment."

## Ep #223: Why You Don't Need to Decide Never to Drink Again

That is true for some people. But it is also true that many people feel the opposite. When they think, "Well, am I going to have to stop drinking forever?" They feel a lot of pain and a lot of suffering and a lot of shame. And I promise that those feelings are not going to lead somewhere positive when it comes to changing the habit or changing your relationship with alcohol.

And that's not to say that one person is doing the thought correctly and the other one is doing the thought incorrectly. It's just making space that there are different responses, different reactions to this idea that you should stop drinking for the rest of your life.

And I think that's where people get confused. I think the people who feel empowered by deciding never to drink again, they think that the people on the other side of the aisle, the people who kind of shudder at the idea of like, "Oh my god, so I'm never going to have alcohol again?" they think, "Oh, well I just need to convince them. I need to show them the way."

And then, I think the reverse is true, the people who kind of shudder at the idea of never drinking again feel like the people across the aisle from them who felt empowered by that thought are deluding themselves.

This is what happens. We don't create space for the fact that there are different responses to the same thought. And it's not about then convincing yourself that you need to be in one camp or the other. It's about making space for where you actually are.

Because the most powerful part of the think-feel-act cycle is that it asks you to focus on you and only you. How do you feel when you think, "I don't know, I think maybe I really should never drink again." Even if you know all the upsides, even if you think it's really logical, you can see all the benefits, even if you know that deciding not to drink again would make people in your life happy, how do you feel? That's what matters.

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

## Ep #223: Why You Don't Need to Decide Never to Drink Again

I will tell you this. So often, our decision is made more complicated by thinking about what other people want for us. So, maybe your partner would really like you to stop. Or perhaps your best friend has said as much. They've said, "I really don't like your drinking."

Maybe you believe that there's actually no upside. You might be thinking, "You know, I want to want to stop. But that's not where I am right now" But here's the catch. Even if you've weighed all the pros and cons, even if people in your life think you'd be better off if you weren't drinking, even if you have all this evidence that it would be better for you not to drink, if the thought, "I should stop drinking forever," feels terrible, you will stay in a place that is very unhelpful when it comes to change.

I think that a lot of people are really afraid of this idea that they have to declare a lifelong abstinence because either it feels really forced on them, so it feels like people are expecting them to do something, or because they're imagining a future which looks pretty dismal, it doesn't look very fun.

And really, in all seriousness, what I want you to consider is, why do you have to decide? Why do you have to decide what you're going to do with alcohol for the rest of your life? Why does this even have to be a decision? If you didn't believe that it was necessary for change, if you didn't believe that lifelong abstinence is the only way, why would you have to decide?

There is so much freedom in just allowing yourself to think, "You know what? Maybe I don't have to decide what I'm going to do for the rest of my life."

There are very few things that I have decided to do for the rest of my life. One of them was getting married. But you know what? I was really excited walking down the aisle to make that commitment. I was really 110% fully onboard.

## Ep #223: Why You Don't Need to Decide Never to Drink Again

You know what I was not excited to do? I was not excited to walk down the aisle with sobriety. It did not sound fun. I did not want to exchange rings. It sounded dismal. It sounded boring. It sounded like I would always feel like I was missing out.

And I think this is why so many people get stuck because on the one hand, we're told, "Well, the solution is that you have to decide what you're going to do for the rest of your life. But there's no space for the fact that for many people, this doesn't feel good. They don't want to commit to something that they aren't excited about. Because who does?"

Who wants to commit to something that you don't feel good about? It's a recipe for disaster. And I'm not saying that you should work to get excited about making a commitment for the rest of your life. I'm just saying, why not take a commitment for the rest of your life off the table.

Why not, instead of deciding what you're going to do 10 years or 20 years or 30 years from now, why not decide, "What do I want to do today?" Instead of focusing on the next decade, instead of focusing on when you're 90, "What do I want to do right now?"

Because when you focus on never drinking again and it doesn't feel empowering, it feels terrible for you, maybe fear is coming up or shame is coming up or resentment or rebellion is coming up, then you have to ask yourself, "Okay, so when I have all of these emotions bubbling up, how am I showing up?"

Most people find that they're not showing up in a way that is very conducive to habit-change. They're hiding or shutting down. They're rebelling. They're not asking for help. They're disconnecting from the people in their life. They're falling into a pity party. Or they're trying to drink just to prove that they can.

## Ep #223: Why You Don't Need to Decide Never to Drink Again

None of these actions are going to send you in the direction that you want to go. From the outside, it seems like yeah, this is what you should do, just make a decision that you're not going to drink for the rest of your life, because we've been told over and over and over again, we've been socialized to believe that that is the solution.

And for some people, that thought, making that decision, it does work. But for others, it has the opposite effect. It created the opposite of what we want because we're hiding and we're shutting down and we're disconnecting and we're falling into a pity party and we're drinking just to prove that we can.

That's what I think the real problem is. We don't make enough space for the people who feel very disempowered by this idea or very angry or resentful by this idea that they have to decide what they're doing for the rest of their lives. And we spend a lot of time trying to convince them.

I don't think that's helpful. Nobody likes being convinced. Instead of just making space for, like, where are you right now? And by the way, maybe you don't need to make a decision for the rest of your life.

Because I think the real question is, "Okay, what is your goal when it comes to the life that you want to live?" Take alcohol completely out of the equation. What is the goal for the life that you want to live?

We take alcohol off the table when we're considering this because I think it helps give you clarity. Because you can spend the rest of your life drinking and be miserable, and you can spend the rest of your life sober and be miserable.

The fact of the matter is that alcohol is not what's going to make you happy or unhappy. That's up to you. So, let's just take it off the table. What do you want out of life? Do you want to feel connected to the people you love? Do

## Ep #223: Why You Don't Need to Decide Never to Drink Again

you want to be more present as you go about your day? Do you want a life that's filled with more adventure? Do you want to go after some of your dreams? What do you really want deep down?

You have to be brave enough to ask yourself that question and brave enough to answer it. Because once you have an answer, then you can say, "Okay, so how am I going to focus on creating more of that today? And will alcohol help me get there or not?"

Honestly, that's what was so freeing for me in my own journey, just to take alcohol off the table. Not because I was making a decision to never drink again, but just to stop and think, "What do I actually want in my life?" Let's not think about whether or not I'm going to be drinking when I'm 90. What do I actually want?

And for me, I had to give myself permission to say, "You know what? You don't have to know what you're going to do for the rest of your life and that's totally okay." That permission to not decide, "Hey, I'm never going to drink again," to take that way, that felt so open and so expansive for me because there was no rule that was making for myself, that I had to follow. Which also meant there was nothing for me to rebel against.

You can make a decision that you want to stop drinking for the rest of your life. But only do it if you want to do it. Only do it if it feels empowering, if it's something that you are excited to do. If it doesn't feel that way, that doesn't mean there's anything wrong with you. That doesn't mean that you are doing anything wrong. But you have to notice, "Okay, so what does come up for me? Do I feel fear that I'm going to be missing out on the good life? Do I feel shame that something's wrong with me? Do I feel resentful because I feel like this is being forced upon me?"

If it doesn't feel good for you, then just take it off the table, this idea that you have to decide something for the rest of your life. Decide what you

## Ep #223: Why You Don't Need to Decide Never to Drink Again

want to do today. Decide what you want from your life and how you're going to go about getting it.

When you drop all the shoulds, drop all the expectations from other people, then you can just get curious. Because if not drinking for the rest of your life sounds like pain and suffering, be curious about why that is. Be curious on what you think you'll be giving up.

That curiosity, answering those questions is going to help you so much more when it comes to changing the habit and changing your relationship with alcohol than making this kind of commitment that you'll never drink again.

Be curious if you notice that you don't want another rule or another restriction or another to-do that you have to get done. Be curious, if you are worried that you're not going to be spontaneous or silly and you feel like you're just going to be so serious all the time. Be curious if you're envisioning a future that doesn't sound like a lot of fun. Because no one wants to move towards a future that isn't exciting.

When you feel resistance around this thought, that you have to decide what you're going to do with alcohol for the rest of your life, just get curious. The truth is, you don't have to decide. You really don't. You can change the habit of drinking. You can change your relationship with alcohol and never decide what you're doing for the rest of your life. I know because it's exactly what I've done.

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

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

## **Ep #223: Why You Don't Need to Decide Never to Drink Again**

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](https://RachelHart.com/join). Together, we're going to blow your mind.