

Ep #182: Abstinence vs. Moderation



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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 182.

Whether you want to drink less or stop drinking, this podcast will help you change the habit from the inside out. We're challenging conventional wisdom about why people drink and why it can be hard to resist temptation. No labels, no judgment, just practical tools to take control of your desire and stop worrying about your drinking. Now, here's your host Rachel Hart.

Well hello friends. We're talking about abstinence versus moderation today because I get asked this question all the time. And if you have struggled with your drinking, you too have probably spent a lot of time thinking about which one you need to choose. Because that's how it's presented.

It's presented as a choice between either I can stop drinking entirely forever, for the rest of my life, or I can learn how to moderate my consumption. And so the brain spends a lot of time trying to figure out which one is the right path. Is moderation even possible for me? Am I going to have to abstain for the rest of my life?

I know that I wrestled with these questions for a long time because I literally thought they were the only two options for me. The reason why we're fixated on abstinence and moderation is because most approaches out there that deal with drinking fall into one of these two camps.

Either complete abstinence is the only way to do it, or you need to learn how to practice moderating and limit yourself. And so what I want to do today is explain my viewpoint on both abstinence and moderation, and why I think that both of these options are rife with problems.

Both of them set you up for a lifetime of struggle. And I'm going to explain what I teach instead. So let's start off with abstinence. Now, I've talked about abstinence on the podcast before, and you know if you listen to the

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podcast that I think it's really important sometimes to just look at how a word is defined.

And if we look up the word abstinence, one of the definitions you will find is the practice of restraining oneself from indulging in something. I really want you to listen to that definition. The fact or practice of restraining oneself from indulging in something.

Do you see why this might be a problem? Can you imagine a life of restraining yourself from alcohol? Does that sound fun? Does that sound enjoyable? It most certainly does not. When you are restraining yourself from alcohol or really anything, you're using force to resist, to hold yourself back. So your desire isn't changing, it stays the same. You just keep trying to restrain yourself.

What I'm talking to all of you about, what I'm teaching here on this podcast, what I teach my clients is how to change your desire. I want you to think of it like an old volume knob. So imagine that knob controls your desire and you can slowly start to turn it down.

Abstinence says you can't change the volume. However loud the music is playing, you just got to leave it there. It's stuck, and you got to learn to live with it, or you have to try to find a lot of ways to escape the sound of it. Maybe you go to a different room, maybe you try to put headphones on.

But that's what abstinence is teaching you. It's the entire premise of just say no campaigns. It's the entire premise of something like AA, which says you have to admit that you're powerless to alcohol and say no for the rest of your life. The entire premise is, "Restrain yourself. Hold yourself back. Fight off your desire."

Listen, going to war with your desire for the rest of your life does not sound very fun to me. Not only that, it sounds pretty exhausting. And that's why this focus on restraint, that's why so many people give into their desire

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because all they know how to do is to grit their teeth and say no, or give in and say yes. That's all they're learning how to do. They don't realize that there's another option.

They don't realize that their desire is something not only that they created, but that it's pliable. They can work with it. They can learn how to change it. they can mold it into something different.

I really want you to consider this. Abstaining is not the same as not drinking. Really stay with me here. It's not just semantics. This is not just being clever with how you word it. This really is everything when it comes to this work.

You can say no to a drink and still really, really, really want to drink. I know that that's true because I spent many years in my life being in that exact same situation. Really, really, really having all this desire to drink, and then trying to say no, trying to restrain myself.

You can also say no to a drink and try to convince yourself that it's poison or it's bad for you. You know this. You've probably tried this. Oh, maybe if I could just learn my lesson, maybe if I could just remember how terrible I feel the next morning, maybe if I could just remember how taxing alcohol is on my system.

Now, the problem is you know deep down when you're engaged in that, engaged in trying to convince yourself how alcohol is so bad for you, you know that you still really want it. You know that that desire is there. It's just becoming kind of a forbidden fruit for you, this thing that you aren't supposed to want but you really do deep down.

You can also say no and not want it. So you can say no to a drink and still really, really want it. You can say no to a drink, trying to convince yourself that it's bad for you and you shouldn't want it. Or you can say no and

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actually not want it. Truly deeply have zero desire. You aren't fooling yourself. You just simply aren't interested.

I talk about this like a glass of milk. So a glass of milk has pretty much zero appeal for me. Now, if you love milk, swap in something else. But for me, not really feeling it. If someone offers me a glass of milk, I'm not like, "Oh sorry, I'm abstaining from milk."

I would just say no thanks and then move on and be done with it. There's not a lot of drama going on. I'm not worried about what they think. I'm not up in my head wondering, "Maybe I could really have some milk. Maybe the milk won't be a problem this time. Maybe I should remind myself how bad milk is for me." I'm not doing any of that because I just don't have any desire for it so it's just so clean and simple.

Think about how that can be true for you with alcohol. Just a clean and simple, "No thank you, I'm good," moving on. Devoting so little mental energy to it. The reason why people think that you have to abstain from alcohol, that you have to restrain yourself from indulging is simply because we are misinformed.

We are taught that your desire is fixed, and what I mean by that, we are taught that if you love to drink, you will always love to drink. So that's the first thing that we're taught that is wrong. And the second thing we're taught that is wrong is that alcohol creates your desire.

So you can't actually change it because you can't change alcohol. So when you're taught these two things as most of us are, of course you view not drinking, saying no as abstaining. Of course, you see it through the lens of restraining yourself from indulging.

Because you believe that your desire is fixed and that alcohol creates it. So what are you going to do? Your only choice is to restrain. This is the

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problem. It's letting go of these two misconceptions about desire that will start to transform everything for you.

Because here's what I want you to consider. Yes, alcohol, when you consume it, creates a dopamine response in your brain. That is not the same as your desire. Most people have no idea. We're not taught that we can separate out the dopamine response that is happening from the desire that we are feeling.

Because your desire is created by what you're thinking about. Your thoughts about the drink in front of you, your thoughts about why you want to drink it, your thoughts about what you believe having the drink is going to do for you, your thoughts about what drinking or not drinking means about you, your thoughts about how you will feel if you say yes and how you will feel if you say no, and your thoughts about what's happening in your body once you start drinking.

All of those thoughts, most people are completely unconscious to. I know I was. Didn't even know they were there. Wasn't even clear to me that any of this thinking was happening, but of course it was. It was just outside of my awareness.

But once I started to bring it to the surface, that's when I really started to understand, oh okay, so this is what's really creating my desire. Everything that I'm thinking about the drink and what it means to drink and what it means not to drink and how I believe I'm going to feel and how I will feel when I say no and what's happening in my body once I start. That's what creates your desire.

Right now, all of that thinking is happening and it's totally automatic. But you can uncover these thoughts. It's just no one shows us how to do this. No one teaches us about the think-feel-act cycle. No one shows us, hey you know, all of the thoughts that you're having day in and day out, you can

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watch them, you can observe them, you can see what they produce for you, and you can decide to think different things.

Because once you start to do that, you start to see how your thinking is creating all this desire to drink and desire for more, and leading to deprivation and leading to judgment. And when you see that, all of a sudden, you have your path forward for how you can start to change those thoughts.

You don't have to change the molecular makeup of alcohol. You don't have to move to a cabin in the woods where alcohol is not around you and no one is drinking around you. You don't have to change the fact that alcohol releases dopamine in your brain in order to change your desire for it because that is separate from your thinking.

The idea of abstinence and abstaining ignores all of this. What I believe it essentially does is strips you of all of your own power. All of your own free will to change what you think. Because that is where our power lies. Our power is always in our ability to decide to think something different. That is where our power lies.

And when you truly learn to change your desire, you don't need to restrain yourself. You don't need to be worried about the threat of indulging because the desire to drink is absent. It's why I don't say that I abstain from drinking, even though I don't go out to a restaurant and order a cocktail, even though I don't end my day with a glass of wine, which is what I used to do.

I don't call that abstaining, and again, it's not semantics. It's a reflection of actually what's happening inside of me in terms of my desire. Because let me tell you this, I know what it's like to abstain. I tried abstaining a lot in my 20s. And it feels nothing like where I am today because I didn't realize back then that my desire was something that I actually had power to change.

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I didn't realize that there was this thing called the think-feel-act cycle that would explain why I had all the desire I had. It wasn't because of how I was born or this belief that I had for a long time, "Oh, I must have an addictive personality." It was simply because of the thoughts I was thinking.

I want you to think about it this way. What you order to drink, what you fill your glass with is totally separate. It's a completely separate decision from whether or not you desire alcohol. Really think about that. Because it's kind of wild when you let your brain go there.

The decision of what you fill your glass with or what you order to drink is totally separate from whether or not you desire alcohol. So you can say no to a drink and you can have a ton of desire, or you can say no to a drink and you can have zero desire.

But the reverse is also true. You can say yes and have no desire, or you can say yes and have a ton of desire. How much desire you feel and your choice to drink are not one and the same. This is what you need to understand about abstinence. The focus is totally wrong.

The focus is desire is fixed and you must restrain yourself, but it's not fixed. You can change it. You have the power to do that. Now listen, moderation has its own set of problems in my mind. Moderation is focused all about quantity. How much you consume of something.

And when you try to moderate, what does your brain do? It fixates on a number, which seems very sensible. It seems like it makes a lot of sense because we are constantly bombarded with information and guidelines about how much is the right amount to drink.

So whether it is the CDC issuing health guidances or Weight Watchers telling you, hey, this is how many points you can spend on alcohol without gaining weight, we are constantly bombarded with this information about the right amount.

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But here's what I want you to know. Trying to settle on some magic number that is right for you is the problem of moderation. Because the right number is not out there. How one glass of wine feels tonight, how it feels tomorrow, how it feels the next day, how it feels the next month, how it feels the next year is going to always be different.

If you are really paying attention, if you are really tuned into what's going on and you aren't tuning out, you will know that it feels different based on how you're feeling today, what your mood is like, what you've had to eat, how much sleep you got last night, how your immune system is doing, where you are in your cycle, and a host of other factors.

But moderation disconnects you from all of that because it focuses on a number instead of tuning into your body and how it feels. It disconnects you. Because what you try to do with moderation is you try to follow a rule rather than listening to your body's response in the present moment.

And I will tell you this because I know from my own experience, most of you are trying to take your cues for moderation from everyone except from yourself. How much does my partner drink? How much does my friend or my sister or that person on TV drink? What does this person or organization say is the right amount?

None of that matters. It is all irrelevant. All of it. Because I don't care who the person is or who the organization is. They don't have your body. They don't have your insight. They will never know what it feels like for you. And trying to decide how much to drink based on a number that comes from someone else or something else is the problem.

Most people don't want to tune in when they're drinking. They want to tune out, which is why they aren't paying attention to their body in the first place. That's what drinking is often about. Let me feel differently, let me take the edge off, let me not feel this way, let me drink enough to fit in or to forget or to loosen up or to have a better time.

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We're often making the decision to say yes as a way to tune out of our body. And if you are doing that, you will always disconnect from what actually works for you. If you want to drink, you have to be willing to listen to your body and what it's actually asking for.

But most people are not willing to do that. They're just looking for someone to say, hey, here's the magic number. Just never have more than two drinks in a sitting and here's how you do it. I don't teach that because that is straight up diet culture.

Diet culture is all about eat these foods, these foods will bring you to your magic number on the scale, but disconnect from how they actually feel in your body. It's just whether or not the food has been labeled as good or bad, right or wrong.

It's the same thing with moderation. It's this idea that the quantity of what you consume is more important than you, and that the quantity is more important somehow than your own true deep wellbeing, which by the way, is fluid, by the way, changes every day and is never ever going to be governed by a fixed rule about how much to drink.

Now, I'm not saying that you can't decide what's right for you. But if you're trying to do it based on a number, if you're trying to do it based on a rule, you are disconnecting from yourself. And that is the problem with moderation. It has you disconnecting always.

If you're focused on a number, you're not focused on how it's feeling. Period. What I teach is changing your relationship with alcohol, which is totally different from abstaining or moderating. Because when you learn how to actually change your relationship with alcohol, you're engaging in questions like, so why am I drinking? Why don't I want to say no? Why do I feel like a life of not drinking would be unbearable? Why do I feel like I need it? Why do I feel like I always want more? What's that about?

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It's engaging with those questions and being curious and inquisitive and finding out what the answers are for you. And then once you are armed with the knowledge, then you get to decide what's right for you. I don't know what's right for you. Nobody does except you. You're the only person.

And I just want to say this; I think for a lot of people, that level of empowerment is scary. To say you're in charge, you are your own best authority. Because people don't teach us how to do this, how to be in charge of ourselves, how to be our own best authority.

And certainly, most everything out there about changing your drinking or dealing with the habit of drinking isn't about being your own best authority. It's about listening to what someone else is saying is right for you, or admitting that you're powerless and that you aren't in control.

But you are in charge. You have to be your own best authority. And if you don't know how to do that right now, that's okay. But no one can do it for you. It's something that you have to be committed to learning. And you know what, you should want to be in charge of yourself.

If you feel freaked out by this idea that oh, so it's totally up to me, so I just have to decide what's right for me, if this freaks you out, you have to ask yourself why. Changing your relationship with alcohol isn't a choice between abstaining or moderation. It's a commitment to focusing on the why behind your decision and staying connected to your body and connected to your emotions and connected to your thoughts.

And then from there, creating your own unique path that's right for you. And guess what? That path may change. I make a decision right now for me that alcohol doesn't serve me. It doesn't get me where I want to go. It doesn't keep my commitment of growing and evolving. It keeps me stuck in cycle of immediate gratification.

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But you know what, all of it's up for grabs. I'm not saying that this is a decision that I've made for the rest of my life. And I know that has a lot of you scratching your head because that's what we're taught we have to do. Make a decision for the rest of your life. You don't.

I don't know what I'm going to be like at 50 or 75 or 92. I know what is right for me right now and what I want to do right now. And the desire that I want to feel right now. The answer isn't abstinence or moderation. The answer is you. What serves you? What helps get you out of a cycle of numbing and regretting and sitting on the sidelines of your life?

What helps you get on the path of creating a life that you love? Of creating sustained emotional and physical wellbeing for yourself? That's what matters. But you have to be willing to answer those questions and then decide, okay, so what role do I want alcohol to play?

I can't know what's right for you, but I can promise you this. Restraining yourself or fixating on a number is not going to get you where you want to go. Alright, that's it for today. I will see you next week.

Okay, listen up, changing your drinking is so much easier than you think. Whether you want to drink less or not at all, you don't need more rules or willpower. You need a logical framework that helps you understand and, more importantly, change the habit from the inside out. It starts with my 30-day challenge. Besides the obvious health benefits, taking a break from drinking is the fastest way to figure out what's really behind your desire. This radically different approach helps you succeed by dropping the perfectionism and judgment that blocks change. Decide what works best for you when it comes to drinking. Discover how to trust yourself and feel truly powered to take it or leave it. Head on over to RachelHart.com/join and start your transformation today.

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