

## Ep #201: Holiday Ritual



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With Your Host

**Rachel Hart**

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## Ep #201: Holiday Ritual

You are listening to the *Take A Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, episode 201.

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 everyone. It is Thanksgiving week in the US. And I will tell you that usually, this is one of the busiest travel days of the year, but of course, this year is completely different because we're in the middle of a pandemic.

My husband and I actually have had a lot of long, very hard, very difficult, very sad conversations about what to do. So normally we would spend Thanksgiving with his family here in California, and we would spend Christmas with my family in Connecticut.

Now, we already knew that Connecticut was off the table for Christmas because I don't really feel very comfortable getting on a plane at this point in the pandemic. But we had been planning on seeing his mom and his brother's family for Thanksgiving.

And because we're in California, we're really lucky because we can do things outside and we can have meals outside, even in the middle of November, and so that was our plan. That we would get together, eat outside, social distance, and actually be able to find some sort of normalcy in this very abnormal year.

But as things were getting closer, I started really having doubts. And I started reading more in the news about COVID cases being on the rise and hospitalizations being on the rise, and I have a two-year-old. My brother-in-law, his family has two young boys as well and I really realized that keeping

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them apart was going to be pretty impossible, especially because they haven't seen each other this entire year.

Not only that, we were going to be mixing three households. So our household, my mother-in-law, and then my brother-in-law's family. And so after a lot of conversations, we decided that we were going to sit this one out. And I will tell you, this was not an easy decision. My husband and I have very different risk tolerance levels of what we are comfortable doing.

And it was something that we really had to come to an agreement together about what was going to be right for our family. And now listen, I'm not saying that you should cancel your holiday plans. I have friends and family who are making very different decisions from what I'm deciding is best for me.

So I have friends who are quarantining so that they can see their families and have as normal an experience as possible. I have friends who are deciding to get together with others, but instead of quarantining, they're going to get together and they're going to social distance and use other safeguards.

And I know people for whom their Thanksgiving is really going to be unchanged. So everyone is making different decisions. But that said, what I wanted to talk to everyone about today is something that I think most everyone can agree on is that holidays play a really important role in our lives.

And the importance of holidays and the importance between holidays and our emotional wellbeing and how a change in holiday plans can affect you and not only how it can affect how you feel but it can affect the progress that you're trying to make changing your relationship with alcohol or changing your relationship with food, all of that is so, so important.

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So that's what we're going to look at today. Because holidays are all about ritual. And even if you don't think of yourself as a person who engages in a lot of ritual, I will promise you this, your life has been marked by rituals.

So there are birthdays and graduations and weddings and anniversaries and even sporting events. There are so many different rituals in our lives that we use as a way to not just mark transition, but also to mark the passage of time.

I will tell you, one of the things that I miss most, one of the rituals that I miss most when I left my office job and went and started my business, it was March madness. It was every spring, being able to participate in the office pool and watching college basketball games and talking about it with my coworkers. I miss that ritual so much.

And I was totally unprepared for that. I had no idea what an important part of my life that had become. So rituals matter. But then here's the thing; we have rituals within rituals. So think about it in terms of Thanksgiving. So for my family, there were certain dishes that we only ate on Thanksgiving.

So for example, my great-uncle Albert made this special fruit salad that I will tell you, no one has ever been able to replicate since he passed away. My grandmother would make mincemeat pie, and there was a side dish of creamed onions and peas that frankly, I never really liked. I didn't like a lot of these dishes, but they were part of the ritual for me. They were part of my memories of the day.

And the point that I want you to consider is that there's a sense of certainty in the ritual itself, even if it's not something that you like so much. Even if you're not like, I want to have some mincemeat pie, which I never did. There's a sense of certainty in the ritual.

So think about it. Everyday life can be very uncertain. But then you have this special day or special event where your brain believes that it knows

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what is supposed to happen and what is going to unfold and what you're supposed to do. And for most people, this means doing things the way you've always done them on a holiday. And that sense of knowing, it provides a comfortable structure, it provides this sense of control and stability to the day.

Now, this is not to say that holidays are stress-free. I have talked about this on the podcast before. I have done episodes about how to handle stress and anxiety that you have around holidays. So that is part of it too, and it's a big part of it because of course, a lot of people try to cope with the stress and anxiety connected to holidays by drinking alcohol and eating food.

So that is the case, but I want you to consider that the ritual that I'm talking about, it's kind of like the container for the day. The container or the parameters for what you're supposed to be doing. And I'll tell you now that we're not going to see my husband's family for Thanksgiving. We've really been struggling to figure out, okay, so what are we going to do?

Are we just going to treat it as if it's a regular day? Are we going to try to recreate Thanksgiving just the three of us? Are we going to try to make it special but in a totally different way? We've been having all of these conversations.

And I want you to think about why this is so important. Because your brain wants to know. It wants that certainty. This is what I've always done. So now that that's been upended, what am I supposed to do? That's what ritual provides. Certainty.

I know how the day is supposed to go, I know that we're going to make too much food and eat too much food and listen to relatives argue and fall asleep on the couch and that's what Thanksgiving is going to be. Or at least that's what I thought the ritual of Thanksgiving was for me.

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And all of this got me really thinking about the kind of extremes to which people really will fight changes to rituals. So it reminded me of this funny little side note in history, in US history that I only learned about from reading my great-grandmother's diary.

So I have talked to all of you about this before, but I have two diaries from - one is from my great-grandmother, and one is from my great-great-aunt Georgie. And these two women, they lived on the same farm in adjacent houses in the 1930s. And I have these five-year diaries from each of them that they were keeping at the same time. It's so still incredible to me that I have this little window into their life.

But if you're not familiar with a five-year diary, basically the way that it works is that each page of the diary is devoted to one day, one calendar day of the year. And then on every page, there are five entries. So if you turn to January 1st in my great-grandmother's diary, you'll see an entry for what she was doing on that day in 1936 and 1937, 1938, 1938, and 1940.

So a while back, years before I was married and had a kid, I spent a year reading through these two diaries one day at a time. So I was really kind of tracing their footsteps, what they were doing during the year. So I learned what they were doing during the seasons and what they were planting or harvesting on the farm, and really how they spent their time.

A lot of it was really a lot of drudgery. But I will tell you that the year that I was doing this and I was reading an entry every day or a page every day, I came across this funny entry from 1939. And it said, 1939, for the entry on November 30th, my great-grandmother wrote this.

"Thanksgiving today as well as last Thursday. Georgie and family came here for dinner." And I remember reading that and being like, what the heck is she talking about? What does she mean today as well as last Thursday?

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So then I went and I looked in my great-great-aunt Georgie's diary who was keeping this diary at the same time, but her version of it. And I saw that on November 30th 1939, she also wrote about Thanksgiving, but she wrote, "Bake pie and squash, Thanksgiving, over to Dee's for dinner." Dee was the name of my great-grandmother's husband.

So this was a little mystery to me. And it turns out that 1939 was actually this notable year for Thanksgiving in the United States because starting with President Lincoln in 1863, the country had officially celebrated Thanksgiving on the last Thursday of November.

Now of course, Thanksgiving celebrations had been around for much longer, but that was when the country was kind of officially coming together and recognizing it as a federal holiday. But then in 1939, President Roosevelt decided that he was going to change it up. And in October of that year, he announced that he was moving Thanksgiving from November 30th to November 23rd.

So he was moving it one Thursday earlier. The country was in the middle of the Great Depression and he really hoped that by moving Thanksgiving a week earlier, he was going to help boost retail sales before Christmas. Now guess what, people did not like this. They did not like their ritual being changed.

Thousands of people wrote letters to the White House. Several governors across the country refused to get on board. Many people actually dubbed this new Thanksgiving as Franksgiving. And lots of people, my own family apparently decided that they were going to celebrate Thanksgiving as they always had, on the last Thursday of November, which that year was November 30th.

So sure enough, I went back into the diaries to see, hey, what were they doing on November 23rd when the president had said this is when we're going to celebrate Thanksgiving. Well, I looked back and my great-



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grandmother, all she wrote was, "Biting wind all day long." No mention of any kind of family dinner.

And my great-great-aunt wrote, "Mend." Now, what she was mending I don't know, but clearly, neither of these women were celebrating Thanksgiving. And there's a reason why this is relevant for you. Because the only thing that FDR did was change which Thursday Thanksgiving would be celebrated on. That's it. And millions of people across the country rebelled.

He wasn't like, hey guys, this year, no turkey, turkey's banned. He didn't move Thanksgiving to June. He moved the holiday one Thursday earlier and people were not having it because the human brain does not like change to our rituals. It likes things to stay the same because if they're the same, it's predictable. And if it's predictable, there's less danger.

And remember what I talk to you about all the time on the podcast. That lower brain of yours is always scanning the environment, always looking for danger. So it doesn't want rituals changed. Now, what does this mean for you and this year's holiday season?

Now, you can either say, "Well, I don't know, 2020's just crazy. Everything's out the window and we're just going to wait for things to get back to normal." Or because for so many of you, your holiday rituals have been upended by this pandemic, you can actually decide on purpose what you want this holiday or any holiday to be about. You can consciously create it.

And I think that's an opportunity that most people never have. I want you to really think about this. None of us are really ever given a choice. We grow up and we're kind of told this is what a birthday looks like, this is what Thanksgiving looks like, this is what Hanukkah or Christmas looks like.

And sure, we become adults and some people do start to change up some of their traditions slightly, but for a lot of people, what they do stays very



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close to the original ritual. And then holidays become this thing that happen to us, rather than something we are actively creating. And that's what I want you to consider. How would you actively create what you wanted this ritual to look like?

Now, pay attention here because a lot of you are going to hear me say this and think about, oh, so I need to focus on what I want to do. How do I want to spend the day? But of course, that's not where we focus here because what we do, our actions don't just happen.

They are connected to what we're thinking and what we're feeling. And so instead, I want you to think about creating a holiday, creating a ritual from the standpoint of how you want to feel. Remove the people, remove the food, remove the alcohol, remove the traditions. Delete it all.

If you were to remove all of those things, how do you want to feel on that day? Do you want to feel abundant, connected, content, delighted, grateful? Do you want to feel generous, or hopeful, or joyful, or nostalgic? How do you want to feel and how would you go about creating those feelings if all of what you are used to was deleted?

The people and the food and the alcohol and the traditions, just gone. We are not used to putting our brain to work on a challenge like this, but this is a question that your brain can answer. How would I go about creating these feelings on my own?

Of course, what you'd have to do is you'd have to put way more attention to what you are thinking about. And you'd have to decide to choose to think about things on purpose. You'd have to direct your mind. Because otherwise what will happen, I will tell you, your brain is going to just see what's wrong about the day. It's going to focus on what isn't normal. It's going to tell you what isn't right, rather than seeing what is right.

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That's the challenge. The challenge is to really step into a place of actively creating what you want and how you want to feel. That's what the think-feel-act cycle and thought work gives you. Now, this doesn't mean that you shouldn't feel sad or that you shouldn't miss people. That's not what I'm saying.

It just means that you can start to consider that you can take a more active role in what is happening, and that more active role comes from focusing on hey, what do I want to think about on purpose on this day? Because I will tell you, if you don't decide to do that and you just let the day unfold, then your unconscious mind is going to take charge and we know where that's going to end up.

Not only will it end up in seeing how everything is wrong or not the way that it should be, but that is when people end up retreating into food and alcohol. Because then they tell themselves, well, I'm so lonely, so I might as well drink, or I'm so sick of this pandemic, so I might as well eat, or everything is different, everything is wrong, and I just want to escape.

And then we go back to the ways that we have practiced over and over again to try to escape how we feel, but of course, they never work. You may be able to zone out or go a little bit unconscious or a little bit numb for some of it, but those negative emotions, they don't just self-combust on their own. They don't just magically go away. They have to be handled and dealt with differently.

And really, that's when you can start to take a new perspective on ritual because then the ritual becomes okay, not what I'm doing, not what I'm eating, not what I'm drinking, and not who I'm with. The ritual becomes how do I want to feel and how would I start creating that?

The ritual becomes what do I want to direct my mind to think about on this day, in this moment. And the ritual I think most importantly becomes, okay, so when I notice the urge to escape into the bottle of wine or the Ben &

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Jerry's or whatever it is for you, when I notice that urge to check out, how do I want to create a sense of security and calm in the ways in which I show up with myself?

Because those are the rituals you need more than anything. Holidays, super important. I don't want to delete them from my life. But the ritual that really matters is the ritual of how you show up with yourself. It is perhaps the most important and the most overlooked ritual for everyone.

So start thinking about that for this holiday season because I know for a lot of you, your holidays are going to look very different this year. And instead of just saying, okay, well, we'll just wait until next year when things go back to normal, you can start to really take charge.

You can start to actively create something, you can start to really question and say okay, so how do I want to feel? How would I create that? What would I be thinking about? What am I going to do when I notice the urge to escape?

That really is the most important, the foundation for every other ritual out there. How do I create a sense of certainty and stability with myself no matter what? No matter what's happening in the year.

The last thing before we wrap up, because it's almost Thanksgiving and then it will almost be December, this year, like last, I'm going to offer a special December challenge inside the Take A Break program. So this really is something that I love doing because the vast majority of people will say it's December, it's impossible to change your drinking, you can't do it during the holidays, why even bother? Just wait until January.

But I really believe that the last 30 days of the year, if done right, can be the most powerful and the most transformative for changing your relationship with alcohol simply because your brain wants you to believe that you can't do it.

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We had so much fun doing this last year. We saw so many people have these really incredible transformations because they had a brain that was saying I don't think you can do this, why would you attempt this in December? And doing the work and disproving their brain, there's really nothing more powerful that you can do.

So I wanted to offer another 30 most powerful days again this year. So if you are interested in taking a break from drinking and you want to do it with me, and you want to disprove your brain, you want to show it that it's wrong, you can sign up now by going to [rachelhart.com/cleanslate](http://rachelhart.com/cleanslate). And then we'll get started Tuesday, December 1st.

This really is the way to supercharge your results by proving to your brain that you can do what it thinks is impossible. Alright, for all of you celebrating Thanksgiving, I wish you nothing but the best. For all of you getting ready for this holiday season, I wish you nothing but the best.

And just know that you really can create a different holiday season for yourself in large part because so much of our ritual has been upended. Alright, you got this.

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](http://RachelHart.com/join) and start your transformation today.