

Ep #214: Handling Grief Without a Drink



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With Your Host

Rachel Hart

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

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You are listening to the *Take A Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, episode 214.

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.

Welcome everyone. So we are going to be talking about grief today. And we're going to be exploring why it is that so many people use alcohol and also food as a way to try to cope with the grief that they feel. So what I want to do today is really walk you through an exercise that will help you to start to feel like you're in charge rather than this big overwhelming emotion is running the show. And I will say that this exercise can be used for way more than just grief, really any emotion that feels big, or daunting, or overwhelming, you can use this exercise for.

So, on a personal note I'm talking about grief today because I'm currently grieving. I had a miscarriage last week and it still feels really raw. I still wake-up and open my eyes in the morning and realize that I'm not pregnant and it just hurts. And I thought a lot about whether or not I wanted to talk about this on the podcast because this podcast is not about the trials and tribulations of my life. It's about helping you figure out how to change your relationship with alcohol and how to change the habit. But I also know that grief is a reason that so many people turn to drinking.

And grief is a reason that so many people develop a habit around alcohol, or find themselves having a habit that starts to accelerate how much they're drinking and how often they're drinking. And so I really hope that by showing you how I have been working to deal with my own grief and move through it will help many of you. I will also say that I just worried about talking about my miscarriage because I worried that some of you listening

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have lost a spouse, or a parent, or a child and here I am grieving a miscarriage.

But I realized that this is what we're taught to do. We are taught to minimize our pain and tell ourselves, "It's really not that bad for me and I shouldn't feel this way. I shouldn't have this much grief. I should be grateful. I should be over it by now. I should move on. I need to pull myself together." We're taught to minimize our pain. And the more I watched my own brain want to do that the more I just thought, you know what, I don't care who or what you're grieving. I don't care if it's a person, or a pet, or your home, or a pregnancy, or a marriage, or becoming an empty nester, or losing a job.

It doesn't matter, whatever you're experiencing is valid and it doesn't need to be justified. It needs to be acknowledged in a productive way, especially when the emotion feels really daunting, and feels really big. And all you think to do is let's just escape, let's just hide. Because that's the problem, we don't know how to acknowledge our grief in a way that helps us move through it. I know I didn't. I know how many times I thought to myself, I just don't want to feel the pain. I just want to escape. I want to go back in time.

I want to wake up tomorrow and have it be a bad dream. And when we think that and then we can't change whatever has happened it is easy to feel overwhelmed and reach for a drink, or reach for food, or go into distractions, or just work so much that we don't have time to think, all in an attempt to blot out our feelings. But the problem is we don't get to skip over our negative emotions. It really is a cliché, but the only way out is through.

The way to deal with something that we perceive to be big and daunting is to face it head on and move through it. And you know what? I know that that can be really scary. That was really scary for me for a very long time in my life. Now, I do want to be clear, if you haven't been facing grief or any big daunting emotion head on, if you've been trying to down your sorrows or eat your feelings - that's okay, please don't beat yourself up.

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Everything that I talk about here on the podcast is let's just be curious as to why. Why has that been part of your attempts to cope with how you're feeling? Why did you tell yourself you needed a drink or you needed to eat, or you needed to escape? Because you believed the feeling was too much, or too overwhelming, or too painful, what was it? If you can just strip away all of the judgment that you have of the emotion you really can start to see it for what it is without all that judgment of our negative emotions.

It's just a change of vibration in your body. And what I mean by that, it's a change in your breathing. It's a change in your muscles, maybe muscle tension. It's a change in your heart rate. It's a change in your temperature. It's a change in your posture. If you can start to look at your emotions in this very clinical and factual lens without all the judgment, it can help so much. So if you've tried to drown your sorrows, maybe in the past, maybe right now you're trying to do that.

Let's just turn that into information that you can use to start to change how you respond to your emotions, because changing your relationship with alcohol is also about changing your relationship with your thoughts and your feelings. So don't beat yourself up, but also don't let drowning your sorrows, or eating your feelings be the only thing that you do because it doesn't work.

I will tell you that despite how much this has hurt and there has been a lot of hurt for me, there is a part of me that is so thankful that I'm not trying to drown my sorrows. And not because it's more virtuous, but because I think about how so many times in my life trying to escape, trying to drink and eat my way through my negative emotions and my pain, it only increased my pain. It only created more problems for me because first there is the grief or whatever emotion you're dealing with.

And then you have the guilt over having had too much to drink or eat. And then you have the regret over what you did, or what you said, or the emails and texts that you sent. And then you also have waking up feeling

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depressed and anxious because your brain and your body is trying desperately to recalibrate after last night. It's trying to go back to homeostasis so you have the physical toll that it takes on your body.

It really is such an interesting way to think about this phrase, this idea that we can drown our sorrows, or bury our emotions, as if we can kill an emotion. But of course emotions aren't alive. You're alive, and because you're alive you feel emotions. It's part of the deal of being human. We feel love and connection on one end of the spectrum, and we feel grief and loss on the other.

And when I was preparing for this episode and I was looking online I found this definition that really spoke to me. It said grief is the reflection of a connection that has been broken. I think that's such a really profound way to explain what's going on because in connection we find love. And when the connection is broken we find the opposite, we find grief. And as long as you will seek connection in your life, which PS, all humans do. We are hardwired to seek connection because it helped us survive as a species.

As long as you seek connection, then you're going to experience loss when that connection is broken, it's normal. And if you try to avoid forming any connections because you think that's the way that I can avoid pain and loss, that's the way that I can protect myself, and insulate myself from pain, which many people do. And which by the way, I tried to do for many years of my life, you're still going to experience pain, and grief, and loss, because you'll have the pain, and grief, and loss of the lack of connection that you really deep down really desire but are denying yourself.

So the question isn't how do I get rid of grief? It's how do I learn how to show up in a way that helps me move through it, in a way that's productive, in a way that's not trying to drink over it, or eat over it, or distract myself over it? And there is a way to do that. There is a way to have agency when it comes to emotions that feel really big and really daunting. I like that word

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'agency'. It doesn't mean that I get to delete it. But it does mean I get to make different choices when faced with how I'm feeling.

So you might have heard of the five stages of grief, this idea that when you're grieving you need to go through this journey of denial, and anger, and bargaining, and depression until you finally get to acceptance. And I think a lot of people have found it really helpful to think about this journey of travelling through all these emotions. But that's not what I want to talk to you about today. I want to talk to you about how to look at your pain and see what's there and then how to decide how to respond to it.

Looking at pain really is a foreign concept for a lot of us. I don't want to look at pain. I want to stop feeling pain. That was my position for a very long time in my life. But it's like trying to fix a broken bone and not looking at the break. You're not going to know how to properly set the bone unless you understand the intricacies of the fracture. And without setting it correctly the bone's not going to heal properly. We've got to be able to look at the fracture.

So I'll tell you the day that we found out that our pregnancy wasn't viable it was a very long day at the hospital. And I just felt by the end of it this enormous pain after so many hours, and so many tests, and my husband being outside for all of it in the car because of course it's Covid. And I got into the car and we were driving home from the hospital and I said to my husband, "I think there are four different emotions going on here."

And I want to be really clear. This is not at all how I used to react to pain, not when I was a kid, not when I was in college, not when I was in my 20s. Back then it was all about avoiding and distracting. I was not someone that just would say, "Hey, I feel all this enormous pain, let's dissect the different emotions happening here." But I've spent almost a decade of my life practicing what I teach or practicing the think, feel, act cycle.

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And this idea that our emotions don't just appear out of nowhere, they aren't just a result of what's happening in our life. They're created by our mind. They're created by what we're thinking and how our mind interprets everything that is happening to us. And that practice is what allowed me so quickly the day of when everything was happening, to start to unpack what was going on. And so I had what felt like this enormous pain which I will tell you, my initial instinct was just let's just escape. How do I get away from it?

And it's okay to have that instinct because I had also practiced not following it. I had also practiced saying no every time my brain said, "Let's just escape. You don't have to deal with this right now." And instead I just said, "Okay, so what's going on here? What's happening?"

And I saw that this enormous pain that I was feeling, it wasn't just a big amorphous blob, there were different contours to it. There were different shapes inside of it. And when I looked closely I could see that there was sadness, there was anger, there was guilt, and there was also fear, all of these emotions were mixed up in my pain that day. I think that we often define grief as it's this intense sorrow or distress. But it has really helped me to think about it as a bundle of emotions.

There is a lot going on when we're grieving. And I think that's why it's so daunting for so many people. That's why we're so afraid to look at it head on because it's like oh my gosh, I'm going to see too much. But I will tell you this, when you can break it down it becomes so much more manageable. I could identify these four emotions. I could see there's sadness, and anger, and guilt, and fear only because I was using the think, feel, act cycle to see yeah, different thoughts that I'm having are creating different emotions.

So when I thought to myself I really wanted to meet this baby, and now I'm not going to be able to. I felt sad. When I thought I don't like the way this was handled by the hospital, I felt angry. When I thought maybe this happened because I did something wrong, I felt guilt. Now, I just want to

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add right now, I know that I did nothing to cause this. I know that intellectually. But sometimes even when we understand something intellectually and we know something to be true, that doesn't mean we don't have a thought that believes otherwise. So that was going on for me.

And then when I thought to myself what is this going to mean for future pregnancies? What is this going to mean because of my age? I started to feel anxiety and fear. All of these emotions, they were all bundled up in my grief and it really helped me to separate them out and look at them individually. And when I did I could see this wasn't just this enormous amount of pain I was dealing with, these were these distinct different emotions. And I will tell you, it felt more manageable.

Suddenly the pain shifted from this amorphous blob into something that I could see that was taking shape. And pretty quickly that day I said to myself, "You know what? I'm okay with being sad. I just lost a wanted pregnancy. I want to feel sad." And you know what? I'm even okay with the anger, but the guilt and the fear that's something that I don't think is necessary or useful. And maybe I can work on challenging those thoughts. So I didn't have to take on all of my grief all at once because I could start to separate it out. I could start to say, "Where do I want to focus?"

And I'll tell you that for me making space for sadness and anger really is as simple as saying, "Listen Rachel, you're sad and that's okay. You're angry and you have every right to be." And it sounds almost silly or trite but think about how often we don't do that. Think about how often we don't give ourselves permission to just allow ourselves to feel how we're feeling. And so I've been saying that to myself over and over again, naming the emotion and giving yourself permission to feel it.

And also then saying, "What is it like in my body, what's happening in my body when I feel sad? What is my breathing like? How is that different from when I feel angry?" It gives me a place to focus that isn't all caught up in the judgment and how I shouldn't be feeling sad, or I should be feeling

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more grateful, or why am I not over it now? It's so incredibly freeing just to give yourself permission.

But I also started to notice all of these thoughts that were creating guilt and fear. And I decided it was like kind of drawing a line in the sand. You know what? I'm not going to leave these lines of thinking untouched because that's how I really see it. It's like you have a thought that creates guilt. And then if I leave it untouched, if I let it kind of go unchallenged it just starts to spiral. It starts to pick up speed. It starts to get bigger.

And so I said, "No, I'm going to challenge these thoughts. I'm going to poke holes in them. I'm going to question their validity. I'm going to treat them as if my best friend was the one saying these thoughts to me. How would I respond to her?" Again, I think this is something we're not used to doing. We're not used to challenging our own thinking, which is so fascinating because we challenge other people's thoughts all the time. But we rarely use that skill that we already have and direct it towards our own thinking.

So I just decided listen, as soon as I catch myself going down the rabbit hole of blaming and catastrophizing I'm going to stop. Now, that doesn't mean that that put an end to it that day. That doesn't mean that I haven't watched my brain over and over again try to go back to the blaming and try to go back to the catastrophizing.

What it means is that when I see myself headed in that direction, when I see myself going down the road of guilt and fear over and over again, I just say to myself, "Listen, you can be as sad as you want to be and angry as you want to be but you're not going to shame and blame. You're not going to blame yourself for the past or worry about a future that hasn't even happened."

And again this is a process. I haven't done it just once. I've had to do it over and over again. But because I was able to see everything that was in that bundle of grief, I was able to decide what I wanted to create space for. And

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the emotions that I want to say, “No, not helpful, I don’t want to hang out with you. I’m going to challenge you.” Redirecting my mind, not letting my mind stay on autopilot, that’s what I think has been so powerful.

Because I think the real problem when we have these really big daunting emotions, grief or otherwise, the real problem isn’t the emotion itself, it’s going on autopilot. Because when the brain goes on autopilot it thinks it’s being helpful to focus on the negative, or start catastrophizing, or spot all the potential problems, or everything that you did wrong, or search for a quick fix, search for food, search for alcohol.

But you know what? Blaming isn’t helpful. Catastrophizing isn’t helpful. Eating over my feelings isn’t helpful. Drinking over my feelings isn’t helpful. Distracting myself isn’t helpful. And judging all these feelings isn’t helpful. It’s really stepping into that place where you can say, “Listen, I can see that fear, and guilt, or whatever the emotion is for you that you’re like I just don’t think you’re that useful. I can see that you are pretending to be useful.” But the truth is that nothing protects me from loss in life because loss is part of life.

What protects me is learning how to show up differently. And so that’s what I’m suggesting, consider that your pain is a bundle of emotions. Consider that your grief is a bundle of emotions. And as long as all these emotions are tangled up, it will be very hard for you to tackle how you’re feeling, or to process how you’re feeling. You will want to escape because you will feel overwhelmed by it. But as soon as you start to pull it apart, and untangle it, and see the contours of your pain, you start to get agency.

And really it is as simple as just writing down your thoughts, asking yourself what do I think about what happened? What do I think about how I’m feeling? I’m not talking about pages and pages of journaling. I’m talking about one sheet of paper and a two minute timer. And as soon as you do that you can start to look at the individual thoughts and ask yourself, well,

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when I think this, how do I feel? You start to see the thoughts creating the different emotions.

And like me you may discover there are emotions that you want to give yourself permission to feel and emotions that you want to challenge. That's where you get your agency because then you can start making different choices about how you want to respond to this pain instead of going on autopilot.

And I will tell you, this is what I think makes it so much easier not to drown your sorrows or eat your feelings because once you have agency you recognize that this isn't just happening to you, you're in charge. That doesn't mean that you can wave a magic wand and all your grief is going to disappear. I will tell you, I have still been crying, my heart still feels like it has this incredible heaviness on it. But I also feel like I'm part of the process. That I've started to untangle what is happening for me.

I'm starting to make decisions rather than feeling like it's all happening to me and I just need to hide. Untangling this bundle of emotions it gives you something to do, something productive to do. It starts to show you the path for you to head down. For me it was, okay, let's start to deal with some of this guilt and this fear. I don't think it's super helpful.

This isn't about trying to be grateful. It's not about thinking about everyone who has it worse, or telling yourself to get over it. It's simply looking at all that is there and deciding what do I want to make space for? And what do I want to question? And how am I going to do it? And when you have those directions you don't need to drown your sorrows because you have something to do that will actually be helpful.

So when you face a big daunting emotion, whether it is grief or something else, I just want you to practice taking a look at what is there, look at it head on, untangle the bundle, the mess. That's where your power lies, when you start to see that you can actually make sense of what is happening you can

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untangle the messy bundle of emotions, you start to see that there is a different way to respond and to cope. And for all of you grieving, no matter what you have gone through, I hope that this episode gives you a new direction and a new way to think about your pain.

That's it for today, 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.