

Ep #217: Regret About Drinking



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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 217.

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. Welcome back. We're talking today about regret. Specifically, things that you regret that you did when you were drinking, things that you did or said or how you behaved. Because I watch so many people get stuck in this area.

I watch so many people that I'm working with, and they start making really remarkable progress. And that might mean they've gone longer than they ever thought without drinking, or they went from drinking every day to only drinking on occasion. Or they're just drinking more mindfully instead of being on autopilot, they're starting to be really aware of their choices and what's motivating their desire and their decision to drink.

It doesn't really specifically matter what their progress looks like because progress and the end goal is going to be different for everyone. What matters is they're making progress, but they can't shake their regret.

And I listen to them say, "Yeah, yeah, this is great, but I can't stop thinking about the past. I'm not proud of some of the things that I did. Or maybe I didn't even do anything, but I'm not proud of the example that I was setting for my kids at the time, or I'm not proud about how long it took me to actually start to move forward and figure this out."

Shame and regret plague so many people who find themselves stuck in the habit of drinking. I know it plagued me. I had so much shame and so much regret about so many things. It felt sometimes, it felt like my past was

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haunting me. Even when other things in my life were going well, there was always this kind of specter of the past that was reminding me of the moments that just made me want to cringe.

Not bring proud of things that I had done while I was drinking, it felt inescapable. Like, no matter how much progress I made, I would never be able to shake it. And that's a really demoralizing place to be in, which is why I want to talk about this.

And I will tell you that it's not just when people start making progress that I see shame and regret pop up. It can happen as soon as someone starts to change.

So, when someone is in the very early days of trying to change the habit, maybe they just started the 30-day challenge with me, they're brand new, they're learning how to allow urges, they're learning how to understand how their brain works, they're learning how to keep a commitment to themselves and show up with themselves when they fail.

And yet, in those moments early on, it will just be like, bam, "I can't handle the things that I did. I am so ashamed. I'm just not proud of the things that did when I was drinking." And I will tell you, having this movie reel play I your head of the things that you regret, it will hold you back more than anything.

And so, that's why I want to talk to you today about why the brain likes to focus on regret. Because it's really important that you understand what's actually happening in your brain when it's hanging out there, why regret can be hard to shake, and how to move forward. How to move forward, by the way without forgiving yourself or asking for forgiveness

Because I feel, so often, that's the prescription that is handed to us, "Oh, you regret what you did? Okay, ask for forgiveness or try to forgive yourself." No, I'm going to give you a different prescription today.

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So, first, let's focus on why the brain likes to focus on regret. For starters, the brain has a negativity bias. You've heard me talk about this a lot on the podcast. What that means is that the human brain is predisposed to focus on what it perceives to be as bad.

We have this negativity bias because of evolution. Having a brain focused on bad things helped humans survive. Now, of course, most people right now in the modern world listening to this podcast, they don't have survive on their list of things that they need to get done today. It's just a given.

Most people can take it for granted that they will have enough water and enough food and enough shelter and enough protection to stay alive today. And that's a good thing. But it's kind of also a problem when it comes to a brain that was designed to focus on the negative. That brain that was designed to hear the rustle and think, "Oh god, maybe there's a bear that's going to kill me."

Being cautious, assuming the worst, it helped your ancestors survive. It was a way to stay safe when there were real life and death dangers all around you every day. Humans that were more attuned to danger, humans who paid more attention to bad things, they were more likely to survive.

So, there's very good reason to have this negativity bias. But that doesn't mean it's helping you today in the modern world. It doesn't mean that it's helping you right now figure out your drinking. And it's not just that your brain is more likely to interpret things as threats.

Because of your negativity bias, you're more likely to remember and dwell on negative experiences over positive ones. You're more likely to think about the one negative bit of feedback you got on a presentation rather than all of the positive bits of feedback. And your brain will react more quickly and respond with more emotion to a negative stimulus over a positive one.

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So, the brain has this bias, but then here's what happens. Humans have really turned up the volume on it and we have especially done that around drinking.

Think about the messages that we're surrounded with when it comes to drinking and drinking too much and people who struggle to say no. We hear it's a disease, something is wrong with your brain, you've got to stop drinking forever, you need to admit that you're powerless. You need to work at making amends and fixing your character defects.

So yeah, humans have really turned up the volume and the anxiety that people experience when they find themselves stuck in the habit, when they find themselves with all this desire to drink and having difficulty saying no.

So, we've got the brain with a negativity bias, and then we've really turned up the volume on, like, this is a really bad terrible thing and something's wrong with you and you need to make a decision for the rest of your life in order to fix it.

Listen, I am all for personal development. I am all for working to become the best version of yourself. I just don't think it has anything to do with the habit cycle. I don't think it has anything to do with the reward pathways in your brain. These two things are totally separate.

You're not drinking because you're bad. You're not a bad person for the things you did while drinking. And more importantly, working at being a better person can't and won't magically change the habit. It won't magically change your desire to drink.

I really want you to hear me say that, working at being a better person can't and won't magically change your desire to drink. If you want to change the habit, you need to learn how the brain works. You need to learn how to allow urges instead of using willpower and gritting your teeth and resisting or distracting yourself. You need to learn how to identify permission-giving

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thoughts and understand why those thoughts are what leads to you picking up a drink.

You need to learn how to observe yourself mindfully so that you're just not on autopilot all the time. These are skills and they have nothing to do with being a better person. Totally separate.

So, on the one hand, you've got this built-in negativity bias. On the other hand, we've got all this frankly backwards messaging about what drinking too much means and what it means if you struggle to say no and how it's connected to who we are as a person, which it's not.

So yeah, it's no surprise if people find themselves dealing with a lot of shame and a lot of regret. And especially when they can't figure out how to change the habit on their own.

So, that's why you've got so much of it. The question then becomes, why is it hard to shake? Now, I think this is really interesting because the reason we hold onto regret is because the brain thinks that regret is useful. There's this sense of, "Oh, I should learn from my mistake. If I regret my mistake, I will learn from it, right?"

But here's the thing. Learning does not take place in environments that are filled with shame. Because when we feel shame, we have a tendency to do what? To look away.

So, you might have little glimpses or flashbacks of what happened last night or last month or last year when you had too much to drink. But it's like you take a quick look and then you want to push it out of your mind. You don't really want to look at it.

I think Brené Brown put this so perfectly when she says, "Shame corrodes the very part of us that believes we're capable of change." When we think

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we're bad, when we think that something is wrong with us, we are more likely to hide and less likely to ask for help.

By the way, that's why shame-based approaches don't work. Because we don't want to remember. We don't want to be found out. We just want to push the thing that we think is causing all the shame out of our mind. But it's not the memory that's creating all the shame. It's what you think it means about you.

But remember, your brain thinks that that regret is useful. It thinks, "If I hold onto it, if I keep reminding myself of the regret, I won't repeat the mistake." But when you feel regret and shame, your tendency is to look away. So, how exactly is this supposed to work?

This is why people are so confused about why they aren't learning from their mistakes. I was so confused about this. But we don't learn from our mistakes when we feel a lot of regret and shame about them because we're not looking then.

And here's the other thing that I just think is really interesting. The reason why we don't learn from our mistakes is because we think we know the answer for why the mistake happened. And it usually sounds like, "I was stupid. I was stupid to drink that much. I was stupid to say that thing. I was stupid to do that thing."

Stupid is not why you drank too much. People don't drink too much because they're stupid. They drink too much because they don't yet have the skills necessary so that they aren't listening to their lower-brain's demands.

Without the skills of allowing urges and being able to observe yourself mindfully and really understand the thing-feel-act cycle, yeah, you're going to be scared to let go of regret because you're going to think, "I'm going to make the same mistake again." You need skills.

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I will tell you that it really is a terrible catch-22 to be in. So, on the one hand to tell yourself, “Well, I’ve got to hold onto all this regret, otherwise I’m at risk of repeating and making the same mistakes again.” But on the other hand, because you have all this regret, you’re not actually learning from what happened.

Because when you try to look at it, it feels really bad, so you turn away. You remember the night before and you cringe. You don’t want to hang out there. You’re like, “God, I don’t want to remember that.”

I think about some of the things that I did or said when I was drunk and I remember how they used to just kind of float into my mind at random moments. And I swear, it would make me shudder. A memory would just come back and I would really find myself closing my eyes and turning my head away. Actually doing those things.

I didn’t want to look at it. I couldn’t learn from it because there was so much negative emotion attached to it. I wasn’t learning anything from all the regret, despite the fact that I told myself, “Well, I have to have this regret because it will help me avoid making the same mistake again.” Which, P.S. it never worked. So, for so long, I refused to let all of that regret go, and that’s why I wasn’t making progress.

I really want you to consider, how many times have you found yourself repeating a mistake? So, maybe you told yourself, “I’m not going to drink so much when I meet new people. It’s a bad combination.” And then, what happens? You meet new people and you drink too much.

Or you say to yourself, “I’m not going to text this person or call this person when I’ve been drinking.” And then, a couple glasses in, you reach for your phone.

It really doesn’t matter what your specific version of that is. What matters is that learning in these situations takes careful examination. It takes

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understanding how the brain works. You've got to put the dots together. You can't just tell yourself, "Well hopefully if I feel bad enough, I won't do that again." That's not a good place to put all your eggs, in that basket.

And remember, regret tells you, "Well, I should have known better, or I was being stupid." So, when you think about it that way, there really is nothing to learn. There's nothing to uncover because your brain has already decided why the thing happened, why you drank too much, why you acted the way you did when you were drinking.

And listen, if your answer to why you behaved in a certain way when you were drinking comes down to, "I was stupid, or I should have known better," you're definitely not learning from what happened. You're simply shaming yourself.

So, you're focusing on regret because you've got this built-in negativity bias. And then all of our cultural conditioning, all of the messages that we get that conflate drinking too much with someone's morality and character and something being wrong with their brain, all of that makes it that much worse.

And then, we hang onto the regret because we mistakenly believe, it's useful, "It's going to help me avoid being so stupid in the future," which doesn't work. And then you're really in a problem.

You are really in a problem because you cannot make headway from this position because you're not actually looking. You're not actually learning. It's too cringeworthy.

I want you to think about this. Regret has you focused on the past. When you're regretting, you're looking backwards. You become very past-focused. So, you are telling yourself you're going back to again and again where I went back to for so long, where I watch so many of my clients go

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back to again and again, “I’m not proud of the things I’ve done when I was drinking.

And my prescription is simply to stop fixating on the fact that you don’t feel proud of what you did. You have to set that aside. I’m really serious. You have to stop trying to forgive yourself or ask for forgiveness. Because you know what? No one needs to be forgiven for falling off a bike. They fell off the bike because they didn’t yet have the skill. The same is true here for you.

Whoever taught you how habits form in the brain? No one. Whoever taught you about the reward cycle or how it works in the brain or how alcohol interacts with it? No one. Whoever taught you how to allow urges or delay gratification? No one.

We aren’t taught these skills, so you have to stop fixating on the fact that you don’t feel proud of the past and start deciding, “I’m going to feel proud about today. I’m going to feel proud about the decisions that I’m making right now to change the habit and change my relationship with alcohol.

You have to move from having your attention be focused on the past and instead focus on the future. There is no amount of looking backwards that can change the past because it simply is impossible. You need to focus now on what’s actually within your immediate control. And the answer is, how are you going to show up today?

What are you going to do today to change the habit? What skills are you going to practice today? Are you going to practice sitting with an urge? Are you going to practice saying no but not in a way that’s gritting your teeth or using willpower? Are you going to practice being curious about your desire instead of just saying, “It’s just what I always do or I just love to drink?” Are you going to start to be curious and ask your questions, “What am I really after in this moment?”

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And you know what, if you don't succeed today, what steps are you going to take tomorrow to learn and to get back on track? The lie is, "If I did everything right in the past, if I hadn't had too much to drink, I would feel okay now." That's the lie that we tell ourselves. And we tell it to ourselves over and over and over again.

But you know what, if you had a do-over for everything that you regret, every time you drank too much, you know what would happen? Your brain would find new things to regret because that's how the brain works. It hunts for the negative. It searches for new problems.

And you know what? I still do things that make me cringe, even without alcohol. Because that's what humans do sometimes. We do cringeworthy things.

You can tell yourself, "I should have known better. I'm so stupid." Or you can set about to actually learn, why did it happen? And that's what the think-feel-act cycle is for, to show you that whatever you do, whatever action you take, it doesn't just miraculously come out of the clear blue sky. It's connected to what you're thinking and what you're feeling in the moment. And those two things so often are outside of our conscious awareness.

But we can learn how to become aware of them. And if we can see our thoughts and our feelings, we can start to change our actions. You will do things that you regret, even if you never drink again. You will say things you will regret, even if you never drink again. You will behave in ways you wish you could take back, even if you never drink again. Because guess what. You're human.

The question is, what are you going to do today to feel proud moving forward? How are you going to learn how to take the moments that you'd like to change and use them as a stepping stone rather than seeing them as a setback?

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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.