

Ep #218: What About My Family Tree?



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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 218.

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.

Hello, hello everyone. We are talking about your family tree today, specifically the problem of over-identifying with a relative or multiple relatives who have struggled with drinking. I see this happen all the time in the 30-day challenge.

Someone sets out to take a break from drinking and then they get to day 11, and they stumble, and they come to me and they say, "Listen, I don't think I'm ever going to be able to figure this out because of my family tree." People will tell me, "I have lots of people in my family who drink too much or lots of addiction or lots of compulsive behaviors, so how on earth am I ever going to change my relationship with alcohol?"

And I will tell you, I watched this happen on my own journey. I was struggling with my drinking and I decided at some point, well, I guess the reason that I'm drinking too much and I have a hard time saying no is because I have this one side of my family tree. That's the problem.

That was a stumbling block for me for years and I don't want it to be a stumbling block for you. Because when I thought that, I felt defeated, I felt pessimistic about my ability to change my relationship with alcohol and my desire, even before I got started.

The problem is when you do this, when you over-identify with someone in your family tree, or multiple people in your family tree, what you do is you

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lose sight of your ability to create change no matter what your family tree looks like.

So that's what we're going to talk about today. We're going to talk about what it means to over-identify with your family tree, why this happens, this is a really interesting explanation I think, and also how you can teach yourself to drink less or to stop or to just take a break no matter how many people in your family have struggled with alcohol.

Okay, so let's just start out with the basics. We all have a family tree. You did not just spontaneously appear on this planet. You are the product of your parents, and their parents, and their parents. And in fact, if you're into genealogy, you will know that you can get very quickly overwhelmed at just how many relatives you have and how many branches of your family tree there are.

Really think about it for a second. So you have two parents and four grandparents, and eight great-grandparents. And then you get to the third generation of grandparents and there are 16 of them. And then at the fourth generation you've got 32, and at the fifth you've got 64, and by the sixth generation of grandparents, you're at 128 people.

That's just a direct line. That's just your grandparents. Family trees are all about exponential growth. So they're just rapidly getting larger and larger with every generation that you go back. You only have to go back a few hundreds of years until you have thousands of ancestors.

And by the 15th century, you've got a million. So you've got a lot of direct ancestors, and you know what, some drink, some didn't, some struggled with alcohol, some didn't, but here's what happens. When we over-identify with our family tree, the brain, it zeroes in on the relative who had a problem. And it holds that person up as evidence. See this person, see, they're the reason that I can't succeed.

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Now listen, I do believe that genetic predispositions can play a role in habit formation and how your mind and your body respond to alcohol. I'm not saying that your family tree doesn't play any role in your drinking. I just think that society way overstates the role of genes and genetic predispositions.

How often - think about it. How often have you heard someone explain someone else's drinking by saying, "Oh, well you know, their father was a drunk, or their family is full of alcoholics." This is what we tend to do. Culturally, we tend to resort to the family tree explanation for why someone drinks too much.

So we're getting that message all the time. Well, it runs in families. And then we tend to mimic that explanation with ourselves, which means a lot of you who are struggling have looked back to your family tree to find the explanation as to why.

Now, the truth is there is not a single gene that science can pinpoint that is responsible for alcohol use disorder. Because there are hundreds of genes in someone's DNA that may possibly contribute. Research suggests that genes controlling your level of neurotransmitters, how your body metabolizes alcohol, how the reward center of your brain works, just to name a few, all of these can potentially amplify the impact of how you and your brain and your body respond to alcohol.

But remember, there's something really important here. Remember, these are correlations. Not causations. A causation means because A is present, B will happen. A correlation on the other hand means that there's a relationship between these two things. There's a relationship between A and B, but A doesn't cause B to happen.

So what that means is even if we could look at all of these hundreds of genes that science thinks can influence the risk for someone to struggle

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with their drinking and even if we could look and with certainty say, you know what, you've got every single one of them, that doesn't mean you would struggle with alcohol.

Genetic risk factors don't mean that you're going to struggle, that you will not be able to figure this out, or that you'll even have a problem in the first place because A doesn't cause B. You may have certain genetic risk factors, but you know what, they don't write your fate.

I think there's a lot of confusion and I talk about this a lot. A lot of confusion between the meaning of predisposed and predetermined. Predisposed means that there may be an increased likelihood of something happening, but it's not definite. It's not predetermined.

Even if a parent or a grandparent or a great-grandparent or someone else in your family tree struggled with drinking and we could confirm that they had a certain genetic risk factor and you inherited that genetic risk factor from them, guess what? It's still not a given that you're going to struggle.

It's still not a given that you're not going to be able to figure it out. Your relationship with alcohol and desire, it's not written in the stars. Because your brain did not come out of the womb craving a drink at 5pm. You did not come out of the womb born desiring a beer when you watch football or a glass of wine when you watch the sun set.

You taught your brain to want it. And just because you taught your brain this habit doesn't mean all your free will just went out the window. You aren't doomed to follow the habit of drinking or any habit for that matter blindly, forever.

Now, if you're a rat in a lab in an experiment, sure, unless a researcher meddles with the experiment, you're going to stay in a habit loop. It's not really in your control. But you're not a rat. I say this because I can't tell you

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the number of people who have come to me and cited these studies that are done on rats and their reward center and how it lights up certain ways and how they crave things more or less.

And it's like, yeah, but you're a human. You're not a rat. You have the ability to change habits on purpose. That is the unique skill that humans have. Our prefrontal cortex allows us not to be at the mercy of our lower brain and just stay in these habit loops.

Now, if you stay on autopilot, you will keep following the habit. You will keep reaching for a drink every time you have a craving, every time the clock hits five. But you can get out of this cycle. That's what think-feel-act is about. That's what everything I teach you here to do on the podcast about really starting to observe your thoughts and see how they create your feelings and your desire and notice the actions that you take, that's what all of this is about.

It's about slowing down your brain and starting to watch the habit unfold and watch what's really contributing to your desire so that you can learn how to start intervening with it. That's how you change. And you can do that no matter what your family tree looks like.

So what I want you to know is no matter what your family tree appears to be, you're not doomed to struggle with alcohol. Even if you have relatives who have struggled. Because it's not just your genes that play a role in your relationship with alcohol. It's things like your socioeconomic status, your upbringing, so how was alcohol used? How did the adults around you drink? What did you learn when you were growing up?

How have you been socialized? All of the messages that we consciously and unconsciously absorb about alcohol and what it means to drink and what it means not to drink that we're constantly getting from books and TV and shows and movies, your relationship to stress and negative emotions,

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that can play a role in the relationship you develop with alcohol and any trauma or past experience.

So all of this, your genetics and your environment and your past, they all come together to play a role in the relationship you have with alcohol. But you know what, none of them play as much of a role as your actions right now. What are you doing today? Are you buying the bottle of wine at the store because hey, it's on sale? Are you mindlessly opening up a bottle at the end of the day without considering why do I really want this?

Are you going to beat yourself up tomorrow and tell yourself I should have known better; I was so stupid? These actions are what matter. All of your actions that you're partaking in right now matter so much more than any of these other factors.

Because your actions are what ultimately create and ultimately unwind the habit. But most people don't focus on their actions. That's where you can actually examine cause and effect. What you do or don't do. We don't focus there. A lot of people spend a lot of time focusing on the family tree where you really can't with any certainty look at cause and effect.

They will think about their relatives who struggled, and I tell you this from personal experience. I did this for such a long time. Neither of my parents are big drinkers. I saw them occasionally drinking when I was growing up. It was by no means a regular thing for them. But I heard lots and lots of stories about one side of my family.

Lots of stories about alcoholism and addiction and mental illness and my brain fixated on this. It latched onto this as the answer. Well, maybe my drinking is a problem because I got the bad genes. But you know what, I felt pretty defeated when I thought that.

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I started to think, “Well, maybe I’m never going to be able to figure this out because it runs in my family. Maybe I’m actually doomed when it comes to my relationship with alcohol. Maybe it will never be a normal relationship.”

This is what it means to over-identify with your family tree. Because what happened was my brain was just focusing on the people that I had heard about. Those people had problems and now I can’t figure this out so maybe I have a problem.

What I did in the process is I negated all the power that I had within me to change my relationship with alcohol and change the habit and change how I responded to desire. And I did this of course because no one told me that I could. No one told me that I had that power. I was just fed this story that you have been fed as well, which is well, you know, it runs in families.

Notice how when you start blaming your family tree, that explanation, it puts blinders on you. When I was doing that, I wasn’t considering the messaging that I had gotten about alcohol and what it means to drink and what it means not to drink. I hadn’t considered any of that, that I had been exposed to for years just by consuming regular media.

I wasn’t considering the relationship that I had developed with other highly concentrated rewards like highly processed food and sugar. I wasn’t considering the possible connection between how I ate and how I was drinking, which was very connected. I wasn’t considering what I had been taught about how to manage my emotions or manage my relationship with how I was feeling or how to cope in ways that didn’t include consuming something.

And I paid very little attention to my actions and what led to them. I would just kind of set a rule, so I’d say to myself, “Okay, only have one tonight, or don’t drink tonight.” And then I wouldn’t follow the rule and the next day I

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would decide, okay, well, it's these stupid terrible family members that are haunting me. I guess I'm never going to escape my family tree.

Instead of understanding, listen, the reason why you didn't follow your rule is because of a thought and a feeling that you had in the moment. I was blind to all of that. That's what happens when you over-identify with your family tree. It blinds you to everything that's going to help you actually change the habit.

And you know, the truth is yeah, there are people in my family tree who have struggled with alcohol and drugs. But you know what? It's only a tiny portion of my family tree. Remember the numbers I shared with you earlier. Your family tree is huge. But we don't think about how vast it is when we're over-identifying with these certain people. All we think about is the person or people who had a problem and how we might have inherited it.

But really, when you think about the size of every person's family tree and the fact that it grows exponentially, you start to realize, who doesn't have a direct relative who struggled with alcohol or drugs or any kind of habit? We all do. Everyone. No family tree has zero people who've struggled with their reward cycle in their brain.

And whether that is drinking too much or eating too much or spending too much or any of the things that you can overdo, we've all got that in our history. But not only that, we've all got family members who haven't struggled or who have struggled at one point and then figured it out.

I've got that in my family tree, and you've got that too. You may not know about it, you might never know about it, but it's there. We all have the whole range of experience on our family tree. But when we over-identify, what happens is we focus only on the person that we think is the problem and then hold them up as evidence that we can't succeed.

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And I think that this really happens because no one teaches us anything about the brain or how habits work. So we're just operating with these notions of, I don't know, I should be able to drink normally, that's what people tell me. And if I'm not able to drink normally, and if I have too much desire and I struggle to stop, then something must be wrong with me.

But really, why? Have you ever stopped to consider why on earth we think that is true just because that's what we've been told? I really want you for a second to just take this idea that everyone should be able to do something "normally." Take it out of the realm of alcohol and apply it to food.

So consider the statement, "Everyone should be able to eat normally and if you can't, something is wrong with you." Meanwhile, look around. Half of all adults last year at one point or another tried to lose weight. And the rates of obesity, especially in the US, are only on the rise. So we look at that and we think like, something's not right here, something's not right with the food we're eating, something's not right with the messaging that we get around food or how we're taught to eat. Something's not right here.

But people don't consider that the same is true with alcohol. Because the fact of the matter is sure, alcohol has been around for the last 5000 years. That's when humans really figured out how to harness the power of fermentation. It was around before then, but you'd find it in rotting fruit. You wouldn't be able to harness it necessarily.

So our ability to create wine and beer and liquor, it's been around for thousands of years, but you know what, you are not drinking Sumerian wine from thousands of years ago. You're living in a modern world where alcohol is advertised everywhere, where it is shown to your brain everywhere. It's more abundant than it's ever been, it's cheaper than it's ever been in all of human history, it's being made stronger and sweeter and served in larger and larger containers.

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So it's not just food that has been supersized. Most people are very familiar with that. Our food has gotten larger, our portions of food have gotten bigger. It's wine and beer and cocktails too. All of that has been supersized as well. But seriously, you should just be able to drink normally.

It's such a backwards thought but so many of us, myself included for a very long time, buy into it. Without any of this information about how the environment impacts you, how your brain works, how your thoughts like I want it, I deserve it, who cares, I'll be good tomorrow, it's free, everyone else is, how these thoughts lead to drinking. Without this information, what happens is that we resort to the explanation that we have been conditioned to believe. We resort to the explanation, oh, well, people drink too much because it runs in families.

And I will tell you, I really think the family tree explanation, it's a copout. Because as soon as you latch onto it, your brain stops being curious because it decides that you have the answer. Oh, it's my parents' fault, it's my grandparents' fault, it's the fault of my DNA, it's the fault of my genetics.

Do you see the problem with this? Blaming your family tree is always going to be a dead end because what are you going to do? Go back and get new relatives? Go back and rewrite your DNA? You can't do that. You don't have to let your family tree define you because simply, it doesn't define you.

And if you want to focus on your family tree, focus on the fact that your family tree is made up of hundreds of thousands of individuals who all had different and unique relationships with alcohol. It was not this cookie cutter thing. Really if you want to drink less, if you want to take a break, if you want to stop, if you're not even sure, if you're just struggling and you notice yourself blaming your family tree, you have to decide to take this explanation completely off the table because that is the only way to take the blinders off your brain.

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It's the only way to reinstate curiosity. Really consider, let's say we could just wave a magic wand and run a test and we knew for sure that you couldn't blame your family tree, you couldn't blame your DNA. Then what? How would you explain your drinking? If you couldn't blame your genes, where would you turn for an explanation?

You would have to start looking at what am I doing right now. How was I feeling before I decided to drink tonight? What was I thinking? What excuse was I making? What did I tell myself when I saw the bottle of wine in the grocery store or I saw my partner drinking on the couch, or when the waiter asked me what I wanted to drink?

You would have to look at what I teach you on this podcast. You'd have to start examining your thoughts and your feelings and seeing how they're connected to your actions. You'd have to be present with the here and the now, rather than looking at the past, which frankly isn't going to help you. Because for most people, there's just no point in looking backwards.

There's no point in fixating on maybe it runs in my family, maybe it's in my family tree. Even if science was able to say here's the gene, we know with 100% certainty that you got it from your mom's father, then what? What are you going to do with that information? You'd still be a human with a desire to drink. You'd still be a human with a habit that you created in your brain. You'd still have to figure out, okay, so how am I going to handle all that desire without pouring a drink or escaping or distracting or isolating myself?

What kind of relationship do I actually want to have with alcohol? You have to answer that question. The family tree, it really leads most people nowhere. It certainly led me nowhere. So that's what I want to offer you today. Let go of the family tree explanation. Start focusing on the here and the now. Get curious about your desire and how you're feeling and what you're really after in the moment.

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Get curious about all those thoughts giving you permission or making excuses or saying I'll start tomorrow, it doesn't matter. Get curious about how it would feel to say no and feel deprived and why it is you don't like that. Start learning how your brain works instead of telling yourself that the brain inside of you is a problem because of your family tree.

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.