

Ep #222: Alcohol as a Boundary



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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 222.

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. Today, we're going to be talking about using alcohol as a boundary. Now, this happens a lot when you develop a habit around drinking. And it sounds sort of strange, using alcohol as a boundary. Because we usually think of alcohol and boundaries very differently.

We think about setting boundaries with alcohol and kind of drawing a line in the sand and saying, "Okay, no more than two glasses tonight, or no drinking during the week, or no drinking on my own." But that's not what I'm talking about today.

What I'm talking about today in this episode is not setting boundaries with how much you drink or how often you drink. I'm talking about using alcohol as a boundary in your life, using alcohol as a way to say, "Hey, I'm pouring a drink so my day is done. I'm off the clock. Work duty or parent duty, or both, they're over."

This comes up all the time for people that I work with. And it really is important for you to start thinking about, "Hey, how might I be doing this in my life? How might I be using alcohol as a boundary? And how might that be fueling the habit?"

So, it's going to be really helpful for you to start to understand when you consider this concept about how it will make it hard for you to say no. So many people really can relate to using alcohol as a boundary. They just don't have a name for what they're doing or why they're doing it.

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And this is something that I really relate to. I didn't have a name for what I was doing with alcohol, how I was using it to try to set a boundary or why I was using it in that way for so long, which made it so challenging to try to change the habit and try to change my relationship with alcohol, because I just couldn't see what was going on. I didn't have the full picture.

So often, what so many people discover is that the habit of drinking is less about alcohol itself. It's less about the wine or the beer or the spirits. It's more about using a drink, sometimes to draw a line in the sand in your life. And that's what I want to talk to you about today.

So, we're going to be talking about what it means to use alcohol as a boundary, why this happens, and then why alcohol is actually something that I call a false boundary if you're using it in this way, and then how to set a true boundary in your life. This is going to help you so much when it comes to changing the habit.

Now, when you try to drink less in your life or take a break from drinking, guess what's going to happen. If you've been using alcohol as a boundary in your life, a way to kind of signal, "Hey, I'm off the clock. My day is done. I don't have to think about work. I don't have to think about all my to-dos now." If you've been using alcohol in that way, all of this is going to come up for you when you try to change the habit.

So, you really do have to know, "Hey, how am I actually going to move past this obstacle?" Because it is a place where so many people get stuck. So, let's just first talk about what a boundary is. A boundary is a line that marks the limits of an area.

So, you can think of it like a fence or a dividing line. If you think about it in terms of two people, you can think about it like, "Okay, I'm standing over here and you're over there and the boundary is the space in between us." Now, in the world of self-development, people talk a lot about boundaries. So, maybe you've heard of physical boundaries.

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So, someone saying, "Listen, you don't have permission to enter this space," whether it is your personal space or your home. You may have heard people talk about emotional boundaries, which simply means, "You don't have permission to talk to me in that way. You don't have permission to make me responsible for how you feel."

A boundary can be on your time. It can sound like, "I can't take on this project. I can come to this event but I'm only staying for half an hour." We also talk about sexual boundaries, so asking for and getting consent before and during intimate encounters. And also financial boundaries. So maybe, "I'm not going to lend you this money. Or I'm not going to use my money in this way."

Now, all of these boundaries have one thing in common. The dividing line, it doesn't actually exist. You can't see it. You can't touch it. It's invisible space that's created by your words and your actions. You set the boundary and it's up to you to enforce it by saying no, by articulating what is and is not acceptable for you and what is and is not okay, what you do or don't want, what you're comfortable with or what you're not comfortable with.

Now, I just want to start out by acknowledging, this is really hard work. Saying no is not always easy. It sounds very easy, but it's not actually always easy to do. Especially if you have been conditioned to prioritize other people's wants and desires and feelings over your own. Which I know a lot of you can relate to.

When that is the case, saying no and setting boundaries, it truly can be very challenging work. And I say this from a lot of personal experience. I consider myself to be someone who has always been very outspoken and assertive and comfortable using my voice. And you know what? There have been so many times in my life where I didn't want something to happen and I didn't set a boundary, or I struggled to speak up because saying yes just felt easier than the discomfort of saying no.

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Or there have been times in my life where I have set a boundary and then I didn't really hold it. Too often, I made my own struggle with setting boundaries and saying no, I made it mean that I was doing something wrong, that I was to blame, that it was my fault for whatever transpired. And I really do think, before we talk about using alcohol as a boundary, I really just think that we need to acknowledge that when we start these conversations about boundaries, that 't's very challenging work.

Lots of people will tell you that you have a right to say no. But very few people teach us actually how to say no or how to deal with all of the discomfort that comes up when we try to do that, when we try to use our voice.

And this is a skill as much as anything else is a skill. I have learned that for me, practicing saying no, it can feel really shaky. It can feel very difficult. It can feel kind of wobbly at first. Just like when you're learning to ride a bike, you will feel very wobbly.

Now, feeling wobbly doesn't mean that anything has gone wrong. That's part of the process of learning the skill. But the problem is no one really shows us how to do this.

So, with all of that in mind, let's just bring it back to the issue of using alcohol as a boundary. And what I mean by this is using alcohol to almost in a way kind of defend that invisible space or create this kind of invisible line. So, maybe you're pouring a drink to protect the boundary that you want to set.

So, maybe you've had the experience of coming home and you just need a break from the day. You don't want to keep thinking about work. You don't want to keep responding to emails. You don't want to answer a million questions when you get home. In fact, you don't want to do anything. You just want to be off the clock.

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But yet, you end up doing the opposite. You keep checking work email. You keep doing errands for other people. You keep answering questions. You keep adding things onto your to-do list.

Now, part of this is because it's really easy to feel like you don't have a choice. When all of these requests are coming at you, it can often feel like, "Well I just have to do it." But part of this is also because a lot of people do the calculation silently internally, they do the calculation and decide, "You know what? It's just easier to say yes. It's easier for me to say yes rather than say no." And I watch this happen.

Not only in my own life have I watched this happen, but I've watched this happen with so many of the people that I work with. And the problem is that while it might be easier in the moment to say yes to a request, it might be easier to check that email, you end up feeling pretty resentful.

It's not easier in the long-run. You end up feeling put upon. And then, guess what? Drinking becomes part of this cycle. It becomes almost a way, when you're so used to putting other people's needs and wants and desires ahead of your own, drinking then becomes part of the cycle for many people when it becomes this kind of like, "Hey, no, I'm having a drink now, leave me alone."

This is what I'm talking about when I talk about using alcohol as a boundary. And I will tell you this. People will describe it very differently. It doesn't look the same for everyone.

So, some people will say, "Listen, when my family sees that I've opened a bottle of wine and I've got a wine glass in my hand, they know, don't bother me." Other people will say, "Well, you know what? I do keep getting bothered, even once I start drinking. But it's just so much easier to say no when someone asks me to do something and I say no and they feel disappointed, I just don't feel as guilty."

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And still, other people will say, “You know what? I keep getting bothered once I pour myself a drink in the evening, and I actually still say yes. But because I’ve had a couple glasses, I’m feeling a little buzz, I’m just so much less irritated by doing the thing that I don’t actually want to do.”

All of these are examples of using alcohol as a boundary. And notice how they all look different. So, you’re going to have to explore for yourself, how might this show up in your own life?

Now, I realize now that I was doing this in my own life. I was using alcohol as a boundary even when I lived on my own, even when I was coming home to an empty apartment. Drinking was my way of being off the clock. It was my way of setting a boundary even though I didn’t realize that’s what I was doing at the time.

So, I would open up the bottle and I would stop looking at my work email. I would stop being on my phone and responding to whatever my boss was sending me. I would stop thinking about the day.

So, it doesn’t matter if you’re coming home to a partner or a partner and kids, or you’re coming home to nobody, you’re coming home to yourself, you can still be using alcohol as a boundary.

Again, how you use alcohol to set this kind of invisible boundary, it’s going to look different for different people. You might find that you open the wine bottle and you keep looking at your work email. You keep responding, you just feel a little less irritated by it.

You might use drinking as a pretext for saying no. So, “I mean, I can’t possibly review this document because I’ve had a couple glasses of wine.” You might find yourself doing the opposite.

You might pour a drink as a defense, like, “Listen, don’t bother me.” Or you might pour a drink almost as a remedy like, “This will be easier once I have

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a glass in my hand.” What matters is less about what happens once you start drinking.

It matters much less how you’re using alcohol as a boundary. What really matters is how would you feel saying no or not doing the things people ask of you or not responding if you didn’t have a drink in your hand? That’s the question that’s most important. How does it feel to say no without alcohol almost as a buffer? How does it feel to say no to cooking dinner when you’re totally sober? How does it feel not to check your work email in the evening and wait until you get to work the next day? How does it feel to say to people in your life who you love and care about, “You know what? I don’t want to do that,” or, “I don’t have the time?”

How does it feel to say, “You know what? I’m off the clock,” just because? For no reason other than, “I’ve decided.” No explanation, no drink in your hand, just a straightforward, “No, I’m not doing this. And that’s okay. I have my own back.”

Now, if you are like how I used to be, it probably feels really, really uncomfortable. And your brain will make so many excuses for why, you know, “You should just say yes. Really, you have the time. You should help out. They’re going to be upset if you say no. It’s just going to be easier to say yes and to deal with the blowback.”

But really, all of the excuses that your brain is making for saying yes are simply because you don’t have the practice of saying no. You’re not as comfortable saying no. And this is what happens again and again. When we are conditioned to put other people’s needs and priorities ahead of our own, we get very good at saying yes to other people and we just don’t have the kind of muscle memory of saying no.

So often, that’s what drinking as me-time is really about. It’s about filling that invisible dividing line between you and your spouse or you and your kids or you and work or you and your family members, filling it with alcohol.

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Unknowingly using alcohol as like, “Hey, this is the boundary.” Either because people know they’re not going to bother me now because I’m drinking, or because now you have an excuse to say no because you’ve been drinking, or it’s easier to say no once you’ve started. Or you can tolerate saying yes once you have a couple drinks in your system.

But this practice, using alcohol in this way, it’s a false boundary. You’re not actually holding a boundary. You’re using alcohol as your proxy. And I will tell you this. It’s not a very good one. It’s really not a very good proxy because, guess what? If you’re human and if you want to have a life where you prioritize your own needs, your own desires, your own wants, when they’re really important to you, using alcohol as your proxy in this way, using alcohol, pouring a drink as a way to kind of create a boundary in your life, it’s not going to work. It makes it very hard to change the habit.

Now, the reason why is because in that moment, when you pour a drink as a signal to be like, “Hey, I’m off the clock, I don’t have to do this,” it seems like it’s working. In that moment when you say yes to the thing that you don’t really want to do but you’ve had a couple glasses of wine, so it’s just not that bad, it seems like it’s working.

It feels effective in the moment to use alcohol to set a boundary. But it isn’t actually. It’s not actually working for you. Because what happens? Take the drink away and you just go back to saying yes when actually you really want to say no, or you go back to feeling really irritated because you didn’t want to do this thing in the first place.

You didn’t become any better at advocating for you or for what you want. Alcohol is a false boundary because you start to believe that you need a drink in your hand in order to just stop and take a break and put your feet up, put your phone down, and just not do anything. And that is never true.

You don’t need an excuse in order to say no. You just need to learn how to give yourself permission to make your wants and your desires a priority in

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your life. Even if other people in your life, whom you may love dearly, may have different wants and different priorities.

A true boundary is, “Hey, listen, I can say no on my own, no drink necessary. I don’t need the excuse of having a drink in my hand. Even though it feels uncomfortable sometimes to say no, even though it’s hard even though I can feel awkward, even though I’m afraid about hurting people’s feelings, even though I’m afraid about disappointing someone or I’m nervous about how someone’s going to respond. I can practice being with all of that discomfort and still say no on my own.” That is a true boundary.

Now, of course, everything I’m talking about here is the exact same skill that we use for how we respond to the urge to drink. Because when you start saying no to the urge to drink, it will always, always, always be uncomfortable at first, always. That’s how it works.

Your brain’s like, “This is not what we’re doing. We say yes. We don’t say no. We say sure I’ll have another round. We don’t say no.” So, of course it’s going to feel uncomfortable at first.

Maybe that discomfort is, “I don’t know, I’m out with other people but I want to say no. Maybe they’re going to think I’m a buzz kill. Maybe they’re going to ask me a bunch of questions.” Maybe the discomfort is, “I’m alone and I want to say no and I’m kind of worried about feeling restless or bored or dissatisfied.”

Either way, you can feel the urge to say yes and choose to respond differently if you are willing to move towards the discomfort. It’s true when it comes to setting boundaries and it’s true when it comes to changing the habit. Because really, what I find with so many people, the habit that they are trying to change ultimately isn’t really the habit of drinking. It’s the habit of saying yes when they’d rather say no.

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And it doesn't just appear around alcohol. It appears with so many things in their life. But this work, this practice of saying no and knowing that you're going to be feeling uncomfortable and it's going to bring up a lot of thoughts for you and teaching your brain, "Hey, you know what? This is totally not a big deal. It's survivable. I can handle this. That's how you learn how to change the habit.

When you set a true boundary, you're focused on, "Hey, what am I doing?" Not the other way around. You're not focused on others. You're focused on yourself. Because here's the deal; we can't control other people. People are going to be disappointed and they're going to be dissatisfied and they're going to try to convince us to change our mind.

They may even be annoyed or frustrated, especially if they are used to you always saying yes. This is something I really had to learn in my own life. I always told people, "Yes, sure I can do that. Sure I can take on this project. Yes, I can stay late. Yes, I will go to your house instead of my house tonight." I was saying yes all the time.

And so, when I started practicing this work, not just around alcohol, but just in my life, when I started practicing saying no, people were like, "What's going on? What happened to Rachel? She always says yes. She's always willing to help out."

So yeah, people are going to be like, "What's going on?" That's okay. It does not matter if you are practicing saying no at work or practicing saying no with your partner or with your kids or your friends or your family. It doesn't matter if you're practicing saying no to a drink or saying no to someone's request.

If you are used to saying yes in these situations, of course, at first, you're going to be stepping outside of your comfort zone. And people may not respond the way that you want. That's supposed to happen. That's how you learn to set the boundary. That's how you learn the skill of saying yes

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to what you actually want to do. Not what you think someone else wants from you.

I'll just add that I got this advice recently and I really loved it. So, the person told me, a yes is a yes, a no is a no, and a maybe, or, "I'm unsure," is a no. And it was so powerful for me to hear that because, so often, the times I've been like, "I don't know, maybe," or I felt unsure about something, those moments have often turned into yesses for me because I had so much more practice saying yes than I did saying no.

But if you treat your maybes, if you treat your moments where you're like, "I don't know, I'm kind of unsure," if you just treat it like a no, it's going to be so much more powerful for you.

The only way to stop using alcohol as a false boundary is to get comfortable with saying no. And the fact of the matter is, the only way to change the habit of drinking and the only way to change your relationship with alcohol is to do the same. And the only way to get comfortable saying no is by practicing. That's it. There's no workaround.

You can intellectually understand that people pleasing is bad for you. You can intellectually understand that you should be able to make a decision around alcohol and what everyone else is deciding has no bearing, but you still have to practice. You still have to practice not people pleasing, not just saying yes. You have to practice moving towards discomfort.

Just because saying yes is comfortable for you right now, doesn't mean it's serving you, doesn't mean it's comfortable for you in the long run. Whether it's saying yes to things that you don't really want to do or saying yes to that drink that you know tomorrow, "I'm going to wish I said no to."

So, don't use alcohol to fill up the invisible space around you. Don't use alcohol as a proxy for saying no. Don't use it as a boundary. Fill yourself up with the ability to stand with your desires, your wants, your needs, and what

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you really truly want to do or don't want to do. Fill yourself up with the ability to say no. It will be so powerful to help you change the habit, but it's going to be so powerful with everything in your life.

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.