

Ep #230: What You Need to Know About Mocktails + Non-Alcoholic Drinks



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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 230.

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, hello everyone. So in the last episode, we were talking about how you can use alcohol as your teacher, and it got me thinking, hey, you can do the same thing with mocktails and non-alcoholic drinks. You can use them as a teacher too.

And I wanted to talk to you about this because I just get this question so often for everyone in the 30-day challenge. So I'm often being asked about is it okay to have a mocktail, what is it okay for me to drink, should I be allowed to have non-alcoholic beer?

And that's really what I want to get to the bottom of today because I think there are so many misconceptions about this. I will tell you that a lot of times, when we talk about mocktails or non-alcoholic drinks, people either assume, okay, so we're talking about recipes or we're talking about is it okay to have a drink that mimics wine or mimics beer if you struggle with your desire to drink and your ability to say no.

And what I want you to know is that's not what we're talking about today. We're not going to be talking about recipes or whether or not it's okay. What we want to focus on today is what is happening in your mind.

Of course, ultimately, you're always going to make the decision about what is right for you. But I want you to make that decision from a place of power,

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not from a place of like, I don't know, is this good or is this bad? I want you to really understand what is happening in your mind.

Because there is so much to learn about the habit of drinking even if you aren't drinking alcohol. Okay, so let's start with some basics here. Humans have been drinking fermented drinks for a very, very, very long time. Thousands and thousands of years.

Not only were fermented drinks adaptive, they helped humans preserve and store a surplus of food so that it would last longer, and it turns out, hey, they have all these great health benefits. Now, when people hear me talk about fermented drinks, they're often assuming that I'm talking about beer and wine.

But those are not the only fermented drinks out there. So maybe you've had kombucha, which is just fermented tea, or kefir, which is fermented milk, or kvass, which is a drink fermented from rye bread or beets. There are so many fermented drinks out there. This is just the very tip of the iceberg.

So yeah, we hear about the health benefits, especially nowadays about fermented drinks because they can be really healthy. They're rich in good bacteria and enzymes that can be really amazing for your digestion and your internal gut biome. They can help you better absorb vitamins and minerals. They can improve digestion and immunity.

Now, I just want to add here just because people have realized the health benefits of fermented drinks, it also means that a lot of fermented drinks are being mass produced in ways right now that may not be particularly helpful. So they may be pasteurized, which kills all that good bacteria off, they may be pumped full of sugar, since a lot of fermented drinks are kind of sour or bitter and not what a lot of people often prefer to drink.

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So the thing that you need to know, aside from their long history and the potential for health benefits is that things like kombucha and kefir and kvass, they are all going to have some amount of alcohol because that's just part of the natural fermentation process.

Ethanol is going to be produced as a byproduct of fermentation. Now, how much alcohol a fermented beverage will have depends not only on the process of fermentation but the ingredients that are used. And of course, just to make things more complicated, different countries are going to have different rules about what constitutes a non-alcoholic drink.

So if you're in the US and you're buying kombucha, if it has less than 5% ABV, that's alcohol by volume, it doesn't need to have a label saying there's alcohol in it. You don't need to show your ID. You can just purchase it. In Japan, the guidelines for non-alcoholic drinks is less than 1% ABV. And I found online that in Finland, the guidelines are 2.8% ABV. So as long as it has less than 2.8% in Finland, it would be labeled as non-alcoholic, but in the US, you'd have to have a label saying that alcohol was in this drink.

The point is this; you can totally drink something that is non-alcoholic that has alcohol in it. And I don't want you to freak out about that, that is not a problem. It's okay. But a lot of people will get very worried about this, especially when they're trying to change their relationship with alcohol, maybe they're taking a break from drinking, and they will worry about like, "Oh god, how do I know where to draw the line?"

And I want to talk about why this happens. I really want you to understand what to pay attention to when you drink mocktails or non-alcoholic drinks and why these drinks can teach you so much about how the habit works. So let's start off by just talking about why it is that people think these drinks are a problem.

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So whether that is kombucha that has trace amounts of alcohol, or a mocktail, which maybe has zero alcohol but is meant to mimic something. So maybe it's a virgin margarita or virgin mojito or a Shirley Temple, which I will just add, I really thought that Shirley Temples were so cool when I was seven years old and I was really horrified when in my 30s, I remember being at a restaurant and asking the waiter what they had to drink that was non-alcoholic and mentioned making me a Shirley Temple. I was not at a point in my journey where I liked that answer or found it very amusing.

So are fermented drinks, are mocktails okay to drink? My answer is of course they are. Once you understand how the habit works, how it is formed, and how it is reinforced, you start to see that the habit is not created, it is not formed, it is not reinforced by alcohol. It's created by your mind. It's that think-feel-act cycle.

Now, does alcohol impact the reward system in your brain? Of course it does. Does alcohol set off a cascading set of changes to the body whether that's in the form of hormone disruption or putting a bodily process like digestion on hold so that the liver can start to deal with processing alcohol? Of course it does.

But that doesn't mean that alcohol creates the habit. I really want you to hear me say this. It's not alcohol. It's the think-feel-act cycle. It's what's happening with sentences in your mind, not with what you're consuming in a drink.

It's your thoughts about drinking, it's your thoughts about being buzzed or intoxicated or drunk. It's your thoughts about what happened yesterday when you were drinking. That's where the habit is created and that's where you need to focus.

Most people who will tell you, "You know, it's not okay if you have a problem with drinking, it's not okay to have a fermented drink. You really

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shouldn't be having mocktails." The reason they believe this is because they believe and honestly, this is what we have been taught for years and years, that alcohol is why you have a habit. Alcohol is what makes it difficult to say no, that some people's brains are just different.

And it really goes back to this idea of one drop. So this theory that if you have one drop or a single sip, that can trigger a relapse. One drink can set off a bender. I want you to know that this is never the case. A single sip of alcohol doesn't trigger anything.

Whether or not you, after that first sip, have more to drink, finish the glass, order another round, drink the entire bottle, it has nothing to do with that first sip. It has to do with how that think-feel-act cycle unfolded inside of you, what you made it mean.

And I think that this is really where the idea of one sip actually backfires for so many people. I know that it's intended to be helpful. Because when you don't understand how the brain works, when you don't understand about the think-feel-act cycle, it can seem a little perplexing, like why are people making these decisions around alcohol? When you know that sometimes it's really not serving you, you know that you're not getting great results, why would you go back to it?

Well, it is perplexing when you don't understand how your thoughts and your feelings and your actions are all connected. And so I think that this idea like, don't even have a sip, it was meant to be really helpful, but it's become part of the problem.

Because the idea that a single sip takes you back to square one and you have to start over, it's so demoralizing. What happens if you have a sip of wine, and you haven't had a drink for a long time?

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What will happen for a lot of people, and this will happen totally unconsciously, they will just give themselves permission to drink more because they will think to themselves, “Well, I don’t know, I ruined all that hard work. I was trying to say no, I was being so good, and I had this sip so I might as well go all in, I might as well go big or go home.”

Who wants to ruin all their hard work on one sip? I didn’t. Like no, if I’m going to ruin all the hard work I’ve done of saying no, I might as well ruin it with a whole bottle. The idea that one sip sets you back is wrong. The idea that any amount of alcohol triggers someone in that moment or that a drop of alcohol just hits your tongue and then you’re off to the races, it’s a misunderstanding of how habits work.

And I think about this a lot because I will have people say to me, “I don’t know, Rachel, I’ve just read about these studies that they’ve done on rats where a rat will keep going back to alcohol or keep going back to cocaine even at the expense of its own wellbeing.”

And now, the first thing that I say whenever someone cites these studies to me is like, it’s really good that you’re not a rat. Listen, do I think that we can learn a lot from rat studies? Sure, of course we can. I’m not saying we should stop doing them.

But I don’t think that it’s an indication about whether or not you as a fully formed adult human with a human brain and a prefrontal cortex, it’s not an indication of whether or not you have the ability to change the habits that you have developed around drinking and change your relationship with alcohol.

What a rat does is not indicative of what’s possible for you. Because as far as I know, maybe I’m wrong here, rats can’t observe themselves think. They can’t watch the think-feel-act cycle unfold. They can’t write it down. They can’t observe an urge in their body and instead of choosing to just

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react to it actually allow it to be there and get curious about it. You're not a rat and that's a good thing.

So this idea of just saying, "I don't know, well, the rat brain has a reward system, and my brain has a reward system, therefore a drop of alcohol is just going to trigger that reward system and then we're off to the races," it's taking out of the equation what makes humans uniquely humans.

That we have this free will, that we have this ability to watch our minds at work, and that we have this prefrontal cortex that is the most developed of all. It has this ability to really weigh the pros and cons and make decisions that aren't just about our survival in our immediate moment but make decisions about our future and what we want for ourselves.

Now, the other reason that I've heard not to have a non-alcoholic drink or a mocktail is because you shouldn't remind yourself of drinking. So you shouldn't have it in the house, or you shouldn't hold someone else's drink, you shouldn't really even smell it because if you do that, you're just going to remind yourself of drinking, especially if you're drinking a non-alcoholic beer or alcohol-free wine or a virgin mocktail, it's just too much of a reminder. And if you remind yourself too much about your past drinking history, you're going to fall back into it because those reminders can be enough of a trigger to fall off of the wagon.

Now if you need a refresher for what I think of the idea of being on the wagon or falling off the wagon, just go to episode 15 of the podcast. I covered this very early on because it's such a huge misconception that we have in our culture. The short answer if you don't want to listen to that episode is there is no wagon.

Falling off the wagon is not a thing. It's this idea that drinking just happens. It's like, I don't know, hit a bump, I was on the wagon, and then I just fell off of it. The decision to drink doesn't just happen. You decide.

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Now, I know that for some of you listening to this, this can feel kind of painful. To start to take on the mantle of I'm always making this decision. Because if you're hating yourself for the decisions that you've made, and if you think it doesn't make sense, I should have known better, I should know better, why can't I learn my lesson, it can feel painful at first to take on this mantle of no, I was always making a decision.

Or some of you might feel like, "You say that you're making a decision Rachel, but it just happens so fast. You say that there's a thought there, but I didn't even notice one." Listen, what I want you to know is you still decided and no matter what you decided, there's nothing wrong with you, you're a good person, you're not broken.

You do not need to hate the decisions that you made in order to change. And even if you feel like you can't see the decision, that's what this work is all about. It's about learning to bring awareness, learning how to slow down the mind and slow down the habit so that you can start to watch it unfold. That is the unique power that you have.

But here's the deal; if you want to change your habits, you've got to claim that you have the power to do that. And if you're walking around subscribing to this belief that so many people tell us, "I don't know, it just happens, one sip, down the drain, just fell off the wagon," if you're subscribing to this idea that drinking just happens to you, that it's the fault of alcohol, you're going to feel both very powerless to change and also like you have to be on guard for the rest of your life and neither of those things are fun. They both sound pretty exhausting to me.

So every time that you drink, whether or not you like the results the next day, in the moment, you are either making that decision through a thought out conscious choice, or you were just reactively and habitually responding to an urge. And I just want to add, this includes once you start drinking.

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So I will offer up this idea a lot to people, this idea that you're always making a decision, and what I will hear back the most, the kind of most pushback that I get is people will say, "Yeah, but what about once I start drinking, Rachel?" You're still making decisions. Even after a glass, even after two glasses, even after a bottle.

Now, just as an aside, I will tell you that I work with so many people who will say, "I don't know about this Rachel, I always finish the bottle. I just can't seem to stop myself." And so I ask them to - let's just look at that thought with curiosity. This idea that you can't stop.

And so we get curious about it, and we start to really ask questions. Do you have access to other forms of alcohol in the house? Is there another wine bottle? Is there a bottle of gin? Is there beer in the fridge? And you know what, nine times out of 10, the people who will say, "I don't know, I just always finish the bottle, I can't stop," they'll say, "Oh yeah, I mean, yeah, I guess there is."

So we'll start to be curious. Okay, so if there was more alcohol to be had, why didn't you open it? And I will start to hear thoughts like, "Well, I mean, I'm not going to open another bottle. I finished the one I started but I didn't want to open another. Or I wouldn't have more than a bottle in a night."

You start to find all of these unconscious beliefs that people didn't even realize were there, and these unconscious beliefs, of course, they're part of the think-feel-act cycle. Now, I know some of you are thinking, "Rachel, I've opened more. I've had a second bottle, so there must be something wrong with me, right?"

Listen, I really want you to consider, do you always drink the same amount of alcohol always? For most people, the answer is no. No, I don't, it depends on the day, who I'm with, what I'm doing, how I'm feeling. You

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have to be curious about why. Why do you decide to stop? Why do you decide to keep going?

Once you stop blaming alcohol, you find, oh, that think-feel-act cycle, there it is again. Even after I've had that sip, even after I've finished that first glass, it's still at work. Even when you're intoxicated.

So the first thing to notice is that the idea that a single sip will set you back, or that you should never remind yourself of drinking, or do things that will mimic it, like having something non-alcoholic or a virgin mojito, this idea is really wrong. I do not subscribe that today it's a non-alcoholic beer and tomorrow you're downing a six-pack.

Because what happens is this belief system, it takes the think-feel-act cycle out of the equation. But more importantly, it takes you out of the equation. You're just kind of at the mercy of these habits. And if you're at the mercy of them, how are you possibly going to change them?

Okay, so that's the first thing I want you to pay attention to. And before I move on to the second piece of this, I do want to just say out there, for everyone who's thinking to themselves, "Well, Rachel said that a single sip wouldn't hurt, Rachel said that that's not a problem," I want you to know this.

If you feel like you're making decisions around your drinking and whether or not it's okay to drink, or you should drink, or what's allowed, even if you have any of that language in your head, or you feel like you need to cite evidence that it's okay to prove that you can, what I want you to know is that you have not really done the work to see what's going on beneath the surface. You have not really yet done the work to see what's driving the habit.

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If you feel like you need to use this episode as kind of supporting evidence, like see, see, see, I'm allowed, if you're even using that language of allowed, it tells me that you're also unconsciously using the language of can't and not allowed, and you have to pay attention to that first.

So the second thing you need to understand is whether or not you're giving a non-alcoholic drink or a mocktail credit that it does not deserve. Especially credit for feeling like, oh, I had a good time, I felt like I belonged, I felt like I could fit in.

I will tell you, I was coaching someone recently in the 30-day challenge and they were saying, "Sometimes having an alcohol-free wine or a virgin cocktail when everyone else is drinking or it's a celebration, it makes me have a better time. I feel more connected."

I want you to know that this belief that the non-alcoholic drink or the mocktail can make you have a better time is as much a problem as telling yourself that you need a drink, that you need a cocktail in order to have a good time.

Because I don't care what is in your glass, whether or not it is wine or alcohol-free wine or a cocktail or a mocktail, it doesn't create how you feel. It doesn't make things more fun or more enjoyable. It does not take the stress off, it does not put your mind at ease.

It's the stories and beliefs that you have about it. Not the drink itself. This is so important for all of you to understand if you want to change your relationship with alcohol. Because what I find is people will still end up giving a drink, even though it's non-alcoholic, they'll give it credit.

And that really is just as much of a problem as when you give an alcoholic drink credit. So just to give you an example, I will tell you, I remember in my

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20s, I would sometimes go out with friends, we'd go to a bar, and for whatever reason, I didn't want to drink that night.

Maybe I had gotten really wasted the night before, maybe I was in one of my periods where I was not drinking because I decided you've been overdoing it and you need to be good. So what I would do is I would ask for a tonic and lime instead of a gin and tonic when I was out at a bar.

And I would get so annoyed when sometimes the bartender would serve it to me in a pint glass. I did not want it in a pint glass. I wanted it in a highball. Now, for all of you who are bartenders and waiters and you work in the service industry, I am not blaming you. I understand why you do this. I know that a different glass really helps you distinguish which drinks have alcohol and which don't.

Because if an entire table orders a round of gin and tonics but I just wanted a tonic and lime, then how are you going to know which one doesn't have alcohol? So I understand why this happened.

But what I want you to just pay attention to is that in the moment, I really didn't want that pint glass. I wanted the highball. I wanted it to look like I was drinking because I was sure that that would put me at ease, that I wouldn't have to deal with people's questions, that I wouldn't have to deal with people poking and prodding and asking me, "Why aren't you drinking tonight?"

Now of course at this time, I didn't have the benefit of the think-feel-act cycle. So I was very fixated on getting the right glass. But I will tell you that it doesn't just have to happen around trying to blend in or not wanting people to ask you questions. Sometimes, it can happen around wanting to feel fancy or festive.

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We've been taught to have different thoughts and beliefs around different glasses and different stemware. So when you look at a champagne glass, you're going to have very different thoughts about that glass than you would a red plastic cup. I drank a lot from red plastic cups in college.

But even if you're not consciously aware of these different thoughts, they are there. Trust me. And you have to be aware of this because if you're not paying attention to it, again, it's like you're giving credit to the glassware.

Now, I will tell you, I was on a girls weekend a couple weeks ago. My first one since the pandemic started. I was with my bestie Kara Loewentheil, who some of you may know, she also is a life coach and has a podcast. And we were out at a restaurant, and I ordered sparkling pink grapefruit soda.

Okay, now when the waiter brought it to my table, she was bringing a set of drinks to the table next to us. And the drinks she was bringing were these pretty pink drinks in a champagne coupe. So if you're not familiar with a coupe, it's not a champagne flute. The flute is the elongated, tall, slender stemware.

The coupe is like, if you imagine what someone in the Great Gatsby would drink champagne from, it's more of that saucer shape, or that wide shallow bowl for a glass of champagne. Anyway, I saw the waiter bringing these fancy glasses to another table and I said to her when I got my soda, I said, "Can you bring us some of those coupes? Can you bring us some of those glasses?" Because I wanted to have them.

Now, I knew exactly what was going on. I knew exactly how the think-feel-act cycle was unfolding. I know that the coupe glass does not cause my feelings. Just like the pint glass that I got when I would order a tonic and lime didn't cause my feelings.

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But you know what, I've been living in the modern world for 40 years. My brain has been trained for the last 40 years to think that some glasses are fancier than others, and that champagne flutes and champagne coupes are adult and sophisticated and fancy and festive. And in that moment, I was having a girl's weekend and I was like, hey, let's get the festive fancy glasses.

Now, I knew that it was me and my thinking, but I still chose on purpose to have the different glass. Why? Because you know what, sometimes it's easier to work with how your brain has been conditioned, rather than trying to fight it. But you have to know that you're doing this.

You have to know that actually, the glass has no meaning, that it's all the meaning that you have been taught to give it. And I really think this is what a lot of people struggle with. They'll say, "Well, having the non-alcoholic beer, it helped me feel more at ease, it helped me feel more connected. Having the virgin mojito helped me feel like I was part of the group, or I was celebrating too."

No. It's not the drink. It's not the glass. None of it matters. What matters is what your brain made the drink and the glass mean. So what do you make it mean when everyone is drinking a translucent amber liquid from a pint glass and you're drinking a clear liquid from a pint glass? What do you make it mean when you have a pink bubbly liquid in a champagne coupe versus a pink bubbly liquid in a red plastic cup?

Now, who knows? Something could be beer, it could be non-alcoholic beer, it could be grapefruit soda, it could be champagne. The point is that your brain is always scanning for the difference in appearance and then making that difference mean something.

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Oh, does the color of the liquid look different? Does the glass look different? Do I look different? What does that mean about me? That's what determines how you feel in these moments.

So listen, you can work with this. I chose to the other weekend. But you have to recognize that always, always, always, it's the thoughts. It's not the glass. It's the thoughts. It's not what you're drinking that determines how you feel. Because when you can really own that, then you can see, it doesn't really matter.

So ask yourself, are you giving the mocktail, are you giving the non-alcoholic beer or the alcohol-free wine, are you giving it credit for telling you that you fit in or you belong or that you can have a good time or that you can feel more at ease or you don't have to worry about people's questions? Are you giving it way more credit, credit that it really doesn't deserve?

So this is what I want you to pay attention to. Mocktails and fermented drinks and non-alcoholic drinks and alcohol-free wine, all of these things can teach you so much about how the habit works. It can help you really understand the habit on a deeper level.

And so that's what I want you to experiment with. Pay attention to the different glasses. Pay attention to the different non-alcoholic drinks or when you are offered a seltzer versus a mocktail. Start being curious about all of those thoughts and you're going to start to see how much power you have and truly how you are creating the habit. Not what you're drinking.

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-

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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.