

Ep #232: How Long it Takes to Change Your 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 232.

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 everyone. We are talking today about a question that I know a lot of you have because I get it all the time. How long is it going to take me to change my drinking habits? How long is it going to take me to change my relationship with alcohol?

I get this question from podcast listeners, I get this question from people inside the 30-day challenge, people want to know what the magic number is. Is it 28 days? Is it 30 days? Is it three months? I've heard from some people that if you drink too much, you'll always drink too much, so maybe it's never.

We're so desperate on the hunt to figure out how long is this going to take me. Now, I will tell you this as someone who has an entire program all about taking a month off of drinking, I think there's so much power in giving yourself a 30-day break. I find that it really does take most people at least two to three weeks, especially if you drink regularly to really let your body reset.

You need at least 30 days to feel the difference in energy and sleep and mood and cravings and anxiety. And that shift that you feel, it can be so profound. But you know if you listen to the podcast that I also don't believe that saying no to a drink for any amount of time, I don't care if it's a month, I don't care if it's a year, that's not going to be the thing that actually resets the habit.

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That's not going to be the thing that rewires your brain. You need to go beyond the just say no mentality, which so often is just about willpower and just about counting days, and really commit to studying your brain and studying the belief system that is propping up the habit.

Because contrary to what most people believe, the habit is not fueled by alcohol. It's not fueled by the glass of wine. It's not fueled by the cocktail or the beer. All of the alcohol in many ways is incidental. That is what is so radical about this approach.

The habit is being propped up by your belief systems about alcohol. How it makes a meal better, how it facilitates connection, how it helps you destress, how it helps you deal with boredom, how it allows you to become more of yourself. That's what I believed for a very long time. Oh, when I'm drinking, I'm more of me.

Your belief systems about what it adds to social situations, how it helps you deal with emotions, how it helps you handle time on your own, how it makes vacations and parties and sunsets better, that's what you need to pay attention to.

Not to mention, the whole belief system that you have in place about what it means to be someone who drinks, what it means to be someone who drinks more than they want to, and what it means to be someone who doesn't drink. And I'm going to tell you this; you cannot unpack all of that in a week.

And in fact, you're not going to be able to unpack all of it in 30 days. But you really do need to set aside at least, in my mind, a month, to start to do the excavation. Because that's how you change the habit at the deepest level.

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Now, that said, even though you hear me talk about it's not about crossing days off the calendar, I understand why people want to know a time period. And I get it because I wanted it too.

I was so convinced, I talk about this, I started drinking when I went to college, I was 17 years old, and then I had the habit all throughout my 20s. So part of me was really convinced, oh, this is going to take a really long time. I've been drinking for a really long time.

So my assumption was that it was kind of like a one to one ratio, that the amount of time that I had been drinking, it was going to take an equal amount of time for me to change my relationship with alcohol, which thankfully is never the case. Because the habit, your drinking habits, and patterns, they're created at the level of the unconscious mind.

But when you do the work of trying to change the habit and using the think-feel-act cycle and really starting to examine for the first time, what is the thought and feeling that is leading to the decision to drink? What is the thought and feeling that's leading to the decision to have another glass or order another round? You start doing the work at the conscious level of your mind, which means the process of change can happen so much faster. Way faster than most people anticipate.

So I was thinking about this thought because I know it's something that a lot of people struggle with. How long is this going to take me? And I was thinking about the best way to answer this question and I started to consider all the factors that go into the process of rewiring your brain.

And I boiled it down to really two questions that I think you need to grapple with and your willingness to grapple with is going to determine how long it takes you to change. Now, these questions, they have nothing to do with how long you've been drinking or how much you drink or how old you are, your family history, or how committed you are. It has nothing to do with any of that.

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It has to do with how you relate to drinking, how you relate to the habit. So that's what I'm going to walk you through today. Asking yourself these questions is really going to reveal how long it's going to take you.

So the first question when it comes to figuring out how long it's going to take you to change the habit, to change your relationship with alcohol, the first question is why is this a struggle for you? What is your honest answer to that question?

I'm going to say it really can be a very difficult question for many people to answer. So we'll have this knee-jerk of like, "I don't know. I don't know why it's a struggle for me. That's why I'm here." But I want you to consider that even if that is your knee-jerk, to say I don't know, I don't know, I want you to consider that there is a part of you that has been answering this question.

You may not have been saying it out loud, you may not have been spending a lot of time thinking about it, but there is a part of you that has been answering this question.

In those moments, when you let yourself kind of worry about your drinking, in those moments when you kind of ponder like, I don't know, why is it so easy for my husband or my wife to say no, or my best friend? What is the answer that your brain has been giving you for why you are struggling, why it's hard for you? Why is it easier for your husband or your girlfriend or your best friend or your sibling to say no and why is it harder for you?

You have to be really willing to ask yourself this question and answer it honestly. And I'm going to tell you for all of my long-time listeners, this is going to be harder for you. And you know who you are. You have listened to all the episodes of the podcast. You love the think-feel-act cycle, it makes so much sense. You hear me talk about all of the skills that you need to practice.

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And I watch this happen all the time, especially when I'm working with people in the 30-day challenge. I'll be coaching someone, and we'll be talking about okay, so why are you struggling? Why is it harder for you? And I will watch them want to give me the right answer.

And they'll say things like, "I guess I'm not allowing the urge, or I'm just not willing to let myself feel bored." They've listened to me talk about these concepts so much and they've heard the importance of allowing urges and allowing your emotions and how you reach for a drink, but it doesn't just happen, there's a thought and a feeling, and I watch them try to give me the correct answer. They're trying to ace the quiz, but it's not a quiz.

Trying to give the right answer to this question is not going to help you here. You have to be willing to give yourself the answer that you actually think, those moments when you're lying awake in bed, in the middle of the night. This used to happen to me all the time.

Drinking so screwed up my sleep. For a while I would so often wake up at two or three in the morning and I couldn't go back to bed. And I'd think about like, oh god, why did I have that bottle of wine? What was I thinking? Or I'd wake up in the morning feeling terrible and thinking like, why did I drink so much?

What is the answer that you give yourself in those moments? I will tell you, this is what it used to sound like for me. "I just never know when to call it quits. I think I'm missing an off switch. I think that, you know what, I overdo everything. I'm just an all-or-nothing person. It runs in my family. I have this more is better monster inside of me and I have no idea how to control it."

Those were my real answers. Those answers weren't trying to get an A in the class. They were what I truly used to think was why it was a struggle for me to say no. Now, I understand yeah, these answers are not so right. But it's what I had been conditioned to believe about drinking.

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Back then, I didn't understand that. I thought that they were kind of God's honest truth to why it was harder for me to say no than it was for my best friend. So for some of you who listen to this podcast, who are doing this work, who know about the think-feel-act cycle and your higher brain and your lower brain, and the reward cycle, I want you especially to be willing to give the answer that you wouldn't want to say to me because you'd be afraid, "That's not what Rachel teaches."

You've got to acknowledge the thoughts that you're actually thinking. You got to acknowledge the reasons that you're actually giving yourself in those moments when you're just awake. Why did I drink so much last night? Because I will tell you this; those thoughts are the scaffolding that are holding up the habit. They're supporting the habit.

And so often, when people are trying to give the right answer, we don't even want to admit that the scaffolding is there. We want to pretend like, I don't know, no, I totally understand it's the think-feel-act cycle. But honestly, if you're not going to admit that the scaffolding is there, how on earth are you going to figure out how to dismantle it?

That's how you change the habit. You can't just hope that all the scaffolding that's propping it up is going to magically go away on its own one day. You have to be willing to really answer this question. Why is this a struggle for me specifically?

And once you have your honest answer, then you can start getting to work. Then you can start to challenge it. What if it's not true that you just love the taste so much that that's why it's hard to say no? What if actually, you're not even really tasting it when you're drinking? What if it's not true that you never know when to call it quits because sometimes you do?

What if it's not true that you're missing an off switch, or that you always overdo everything, or that you're an all-or-nothing person? What if it's not true that it's a problem for you because it runs in your family? Because

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guess what? Literally every family tree on this planet has people in it who have struggled with their ages and struggled with alcohol and struggled with saying no.

What if it's not true that you don't know how to control that more is better monster inside of you because sometimes actually you do? What then? Whatever your answer is for why drinking can be a struggle and saying no can be a struggle, whatever your answer is, it's not always easy first to find it, to acknowledge that it's there, and then to challenge it. But that's what you have to be willing to do.

You have to be willing to challenge those answers. And I will tell you, if you are like me, it will go against every fiber of your being. You will want to cite so much evidence to be like, no, I just really do love the taste, no, I really am an all-or-nothing person.

You will cite so much evidence in favor of keeping this explanation. And that's what I want you to witness, to see how hard you are fighting to keep an explanation that is not serving you. It does nothing to help you change. Because then and only then can you ask yourself why.

Why am I fighting so hard to prove that I just really love the taste, or to prove that I'm an all-or-nothing person, or to prove that it's because of my family tree? Why am I fighting so hard to keep a belief that makes me feel defeated and hopeless and powerless? Unless maybe those beliefs are actually the very thing that are keeping the habit alive.

It is such a wild perspective to consider. Huh, maybe my answer for why I find it difficult to say no is actually part of the belief system that is propping up the habit. But that is what I find over and over again. As long as you hold on to explanations that make you feel terrible, as long as you keep citing evidence for how they're true, you will stay stuck in the habit. And if that's the case, well maybe your explanation for why it's harder for you is actually what's propping up the habit.

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So that's the first thing. Why is this such a struggle for you? Are you actually willing to give yourself the real answer? Not the right answer. The real one. And then are you willing to challenge it even when your brain wants to swoop in with all this evidence?

How you answer this will determine how long it's going to take for you. And I'm going to tell you this; boy oh boy did I want to hang on to all of my crappy reasons for a very long time. I really found myself wanting to fight to prove, no, I really am an all-or-nothing person, no, I really never know when to call it quits. That's what I want you to start to be curious about.

The second question is how willing are you truly, how willing are you to be kind to yourself after a night of drinking too much? Again, I really want you to be honest with yourself here. When you polish off the bottle of wine that you promised, oh, I'm only going to have one, when you have so many rounds at the bar that you blacked out and you don't even really remember what happened last night, how willing are you in those moments not to beat yourself up?

You know what, most people are simply not willing to do that. They are simply not willing to be kind to themselves in those moments. I certainly wasn't for the longest time. I really wanted to change. I really did not want to be a person who was constantly struggling with my drinking and constantly feeling like it was so unpredictable.

And the thing was I had been taught that if someone feels bad enough, that if things get bad enough, that that would spur change. It's such a deeply held belief for so many people that feeling bad, feeling shame is the path to transformation, when really, the opposite is true.

I will tell you, the morning after I had broken a promise to myself or I had had too much to drink, my self-talk was always some variation of oh my god, what is wrong with me, why am I such an idiot, I'm never going to

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learn my lesson, why haven't I figured this out by now? Why do I keep making bad decisions?

I remember telling this one to myself. I'm just someone that makes a lot of bad decisions. Bad decisions around drinking and around food and around men, that's just who I am. I'm going to tell you, this kind of self-talk is terrible and unhelpful.

I was thinking a lot about how to really drive this home, how to talk about the problem with beating yourself up. Because this is not the only episode where I have talked about this before, how beating yourself up doesn't work, how you can't shame the habit into submission, that shame doesn't just magically rewire your brain, that you need to have curiosity and compassion.

You need to actually learn how to talk to yourself the way that you would someone you really loved, like your best friend. But I was thinking about how to really drive this home for you all and as I was preparing for this, I was like, you know, I don't think any of this really gets what I'm driving at here.

Because when it comes down to it, the answer to how long it will take you to change your drinking and change your relationship with alcohol is actually very simple. How long is it going to take you to stop being an asshole to yourself when you drink too much?

I'm sorry, but there are really no two ways about it. If you want to know how long change is going to take, the answer is not found in 21 days or 28 days or 66 days or a year. It's found in how long it's going to take you to stop being an asshole to yourself the next day.

I really think that you need to hear it in these terms because that is exactly what you're doing to yourself when you beat yourself up and, in many

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ways, just saying beat yourself up, I think it kind of hides what we're actually doing.

We say things to ourselves after a night of drinking that we would never dream of saying to our best friend. We would never say, "God, what's wrong with you? Why are you screwing up all the time? You know, you're probably never going to figure this out." We would never dream of doing that.

Because actually, there's some part of us that knows like, I don't know that that's actually helpful for our best friend, so why on earth would it be helpful for you? And I really don't think that it drives home my point to say, you know what, stop being unkind to yourself.

Because this isn't just about being mildly unkind. This is about bullying yourself. Making your drinking mean that something is wrong with you, equating how much you drink to your goodness or badness as a person, telling yourself, "You're hopeless, you're incapable of figuring this out," that's bullying and that's being an asshole to yourself. And I think you need to hear it that way.

Now that you are learning about the think-feel-act cycle and how important it is to see what's happening in your mind to understand what you actually do in the world, when you think, "Oh my god, what's wrong with me? I screwed up again, I'm never going to figure this out," do these thoughts sound like winners to you?

Do they sound like they're going to create feeling hopeful and empowered and believing that you can create the change that you're after? Or are you just digging yourself deeper into a despair and a pit of shame? You have to be willing to drop what we have been taught for thousands of years that shame is the antidote to drinking too much, or that shame is the path for creating change in general.

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We have to drop the BS that drinking too much is some sort of character defect, some sort of sin that we have to atone for, and that only by atoning for our badness, our wrongness, will we actually be able to change.

Now, I know some of you listening will want to correct me here and you'll say, "No, the idea isn't that you have to atone for your drinking, it's that you have to atone for the things you did while you were drinking. And we're not saying that you have a defect of character, but you had defects of character while you were drunk."

Well, I just want to call BS on this entire premise. Because drinking too much, drinking more than you want, it is a product of an internal reward system in your brain that no one has ever taught you anything about, that is completely skipped over in school, and you are just now learning how to manage.

It is a product of life-long messages that you have absorbed, you have been saturated with, about what it means to drink and what it means to drink too much and what it means not to drink at all and how alcohol helps certain things and makes certain things better. All of these messages that you have absorbed as the truth. And you're just now learning how to shift.

And drinking too much is a product of years and years of schooling that prioritizes getting the right answer, instead of learning from what didn't work, instead of learning from that F. It's not the product of being good or bad while you're sober or while you're drunk.

Your goodness and your badness have nothing to do with it. How you behaved while drinking is not some sort of character reveal. It's really so weird to me that society thinks, "Oh, getting drunk is some window into someone's true nature, it's some sort of truth serum." It's such a misunderstanding.

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Listen, alcohol lowers your inhibitions definition, and it may make it so some people may talk about topics or share feelings that they otherwise would have hidden. Yeah, sometimes that can happen. But you know what? It also does the opposite. It can also give you beer goggles and make you believe that you feel attracted to someone that you are not attracted to at all.

Getting drunk is not some sort of reveal into someone's inner psyche or inner world. It's not a truth serum. If it's a truth serum, we'd be using it to interrogate suspects. But we don't find that that's particularly helpful.

I want you to think about something you did when you were drinking. Something that you now feel like, ugh, god, I was such an idiot. I want you to consider that that was just your knee-jerk interpretation of what was going on there.

But the truth is why do we do any of the things that we do when we're sober or when we're drunk? I talk about this so much on the podcast. Our actions don't just happen. They're a product of a thought and a feeling. That think-feel-act cycle, it's continuing to work behind the scenes all the time, all day long.

If you're not drinking, it's there. Once you start drinking, it's still there. So think about the things that you chalked up to, oh god, I was such an idiot. That's not how the think-feel-act cycle works. Whatever you did or did not do, that action was not the result of a thought, "I'm an idiot." It was the result of some thought that you had in the moment.

And the idea that you should somehow know better when you're drinking, when I work with so many people who don't even know how to know better when they're sober because no one has shown us how our mind works, no one has taught us how to separate out what's happening from what we're making it mean, no one has taught us how to observe our mind at work, that's the real problem.

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Most people completely outside of the realm of drinking, they think, god, I don't know, why did I snap at my kids? Why did I eat that food? Why do I keep procrastinating? Why didn't I go to bed when I said that I would? Why didn't I get out of bed when I said that I would?

So much of what we do is mystifying because we're not given any information about it. And the big mistake is to believe that our actions are the product of our morality, our goodness, our badness.

So often people will discover like, "I didn't even know that thought was there," when they start working with me. Or they'll find the thought that's driving the action, they're like, "That doesn't even make sense, or I don't even actually agree with this." Yet it's hard to shake.

It's not just as easy as snapping your fingers and changing the thought. Not when we've been getting these messages constantly. Not when we've been living them out in our lives unconsciously. So if all of this is true when you're not drinking, why on earth should you have more awareness and more ability to control the think-feel-act cycle when you're intoxicated?

It's a cycle that most people are taught nothing about, they have zero conscious awareness of when they're sober. I really do want you to think about this. Because so often, when it comes to why we hang on to beating ourselves up, it's because we also have this very faulty belief that drinking too much and what you do while you're drunk is some sort of character defect, and that being drunk is some sort of character reveal.

There is no need to be an asshole to yourself about it because there's no point. You're not going to shame this habit into submission. Feeling bad about how much you drank last night is not going to magically rewire your brain. Beating yourself up isn't going to erase the thoughts that are fueling the habit.

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And telling yourself that something is wrong with you is not going to teach you how to put down the glass of wine. How long it takes to change the habit is up to you, but it's based on your willingness to tell the truth to yourself about why you think this is a struggle for you, not give the right answer, but like, what is actually that real truth that you believe for why you specifically struggle?

Because you have to find that first before you can challenge it. And how much are you willing to stop being an asshole to yourself after a night of drinking too much? Are you actually willing to give that up? Because if you're not, I can tell you, the process is going to drag out. It is going to take a long time.

You are going to make some progress and then have a setback, and then decide, "I knew it wasn't working, I knew I couldn't figure this out," and you will slip back into your old ways, and you will be there for a week or a month or six months or a year and then you will come out of it and decide you need to change again. And that cycle is what actually slows things down.

The amount of time that it takes to change the habit, to change your drinking, to change your relationship with alcohol has everything to do with how you relate to these questions, how you answer them, and your willingness to choose something different.

You just have to start shifting away from the explanations and the response and the reaction that makes you feel terrible. 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

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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.