

Ep #235: Why Stopping Drinking Won't Change the Habit



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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 235.

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.

Alright my friends, we are going to talk about why stopping drinking will not change the habit. This is going to really have you question a lot of what we are taught to believe about habit change.

Now, some of you listening, your goal may be to stop drinking. You may be ready to just say goodbye to alcohol. There are others of you listening who have no plans to stop. You just want to drink less. Maybe less often, maybe less in a sitting.

What I want you to know is that no matter what your goal is, and you're all going to have different ones, your goal is always for you to decide but even if you have no plans on stopping, I really want you to pay attention to this episode because it's going to go deep into what we have been conditioned to believe about how to change habits.

Understanding why stopping drinking, abstaining, is not actually going to change the habit is going to help you no matter what your goal is. What I want you to consider is that you could stop drinking for six months or a year or a decade or more and even though you stopped drinking, the habit could still be fully intact in your brain, and that is not what a lot of people think.

That is not what I thought. I thought that drinking too much was the problem, therefore, not drinking, abstaining was the solution. And I'm going to challenge all of you to really consider what you believe is the solution

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when it comes to changing not only how much you drink but changing your relationship with alcohol.

Do you think that that solution is all about your ability to say no? Because I promise you, it's much more than that. Now, before I go any further, I do just want for all of you listening to the podcast who maybe you've already decided, you've already made the decision not to drink, I want to make sure and just offer this word of caution that you're not going to use what I'm teaching in this episode to undermine yourself.

Don't tell yourself, "Oh, well, I mean, Rachel said that the decision to stop isn't actually helping me, it's not actually changing the habit, so I might as well just go back to drinking." Of course the decision is helping you. But what I want you to see is that there is a deeper level of change that most people who listen to this podcast, most people who are interested in this work, that's what they actually want.

They want the deeper level of change of actually rewiring their brain and changing their desire, desiring alcohol less, and truly unwinding the habit. Because what I find is that we talk about habit change not just around drinking but around everything in such a surface way.

So we focus so much about trying to change the action. So I got to stop drinking too much or eating too much or spending too much money or I got to stop procrastinating. We are all up in the action, what we are or aren't doing, which is fine and good, it's important for us to pay attention to our actions.

But our actions aren't everything. They're only a small piece of the picture. If you listen to this podcast, you know that your actions don't just happen. Whether or not you stop by the liquor store, whether or not you put the bottle of wine in your grocery cart, whether or not you pick up the wine list when you're out at dinner, that doesn't just happen.

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The same is true when you head to the kitchen, and you open a bottle, and you pour a glass, and you raise it to your lips. None of that just happens. There's always a thought and a feeling first, and that thought and the feeling, the think-feel-act cycle are what most people are totally unaware of because when we talk about habit change, most people spend 99% of their time just talking about the action and not paying attention at all to the thought and the feeling.

And I'm just going to add for all of you listening that whether or not you decide to drink more, it's not just your decision to drink. Your decision to drink more. So pour another glass, reach for another beer, fix another drink, polish off the bottle, again, that doesn't just happen.

It doesn't just happen because well, once I start, I can't stop. Or alcohol made me do it, or I was intoxicated. That think-feel-act cycle is still at work in the background. You're not going to reach for another without a thought and feeling first.

So what I want you to consider and why you need to really understand why it is that saying no doesn't just automatically change the habit is because stopping, saying no, that does interrupt the habit, but it doesn't change the habit. It doesn't change the thoughts and the feelings connected to alcohol, connected to your desire.

This is what I didn't understand for the longest time, and this is why I found my attempts to change so infuriating. I knew how to interrupt the habit, but I didn't know how to change it. So I took my first break from drinking right after my 22nd birthday.

I had started drinking in college and shortly after I graduated, I moved to New York City and I realized that you know, my drunken antics that were kind of funny at the confines of a small women's college, they weren't so funny in front of coworkers.

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And all the kind of crazy things that I did when I was in that kind of small college town, maybe wasn't so safe to do those same things in New York City. And I remember back then, I didn't know how to change, I didn't know what to do, and I decided, okay, well, I just need to stop. And I stopped for almost a year.

And it was powerful for me back then to kind of prove to myself, I guess I don't have to drink in these situations, I guess I don't have to drink when I start dating someone new, or I guess I don't have to drink when I go to a party or when I celebrate my birthday or all of these things.

So I interrupted the habit a lot, but I didn't actually change the habit. I had so much desire. Even though I wasn't drinking, I had so much desire. I often felt like I was missing out. I often felt like I wasn't as connected. I often kind of turned down social events. I often felt like, God, I would be with my roommates, they would be making a nice dinner and sharing a bottle of wine and there I was, drinking water.

And it was so frustrating to know that I could interrupt the habit, I could say no, but I had all this desire still. And I remember the night that I decided to start drinking again. So I was pretty close to 23. I remember that night I just got wasted.

And the reason that I did was because I hadn't changed any of the thoughts or feelings associated in my brain with drinking and with alcohol. I didn't even know that that was possible. But I'm telling you, that is the deep work of habit change.

You can say no all you want. And you know what, for some people that's all they're interested in. But there are others of you who really want to go deeper. You don't want to just be someone who can say no. You don't just want to be someone who can call it quits.

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You want to be someone who can have less desire. You want to be someone who can take it or leave it. You want to stop feeling like you're missing out or you're less connected when you decline a drink. You want to be someone who can have just as much fun at a party or a wedding or a celebration and not feel like I'm just kind of tolerating this event without a drink.

You want to feel just as sexy and confident and adventurous in the bedroom without a buzz. So many of you want that deeper change. And no one really shows us how to go get it because so much of how we talk about habit change is really actually habit interruption. It's not really habit change.

That deeper change doesn't come from purely interrupting the habit. It comes from transforming it. Transforming the think-feel-act cycles that have been running in the background that for most people have been totally unconscious, transforming those at the deepest level. And that really is what is possible.

It still blows my mind to really realize that I always believed, I always thought, "Rachel, you're just someone who thinks more is better. That's just who you are. Even before you started drinking, always just think more is better."

And it blows my mind to see that's actually not the case now. That I can drink, and I can stop, and I can eat ice cream and I can stop. Not with force, not with discipline, but simply because I don't want anymore. That is really mind-blowing and that is really when you see that the habit has transformed on its deepest level.

So let's talk about what you need to do in order to actually transform the habit. First, you need to understand why you have desire. It has nothing to do with the wine or the beer or the cocktail in front of you. Nothing. It has to

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do with the thoughts that you have when you think about what's in front of you, when you think about that drink.

So often we talk about alcohol as tempting, but alcohol isn't tempting at all. It's not tempting until you create temptation, and temptation is created by the thoughts in your mind.

I want you to really think about it. There was a point in your life when you had zero, I mean zero temptation to drink. You didn't look at a glass of wine and salivate. You weren't looking forward to it. It meant nothing to you. But temptation and desire, it gets imprinted on us, often at a very early age, before people even start drinking.

Sometimes purely because we're told you can't have it, it's not for you, it's for adults, it's off limits. It's so interesting. I will say I watched this right now with my own son. He's a toddler and little kids are so interested. They're so interested in doing what adults do. Even silly things that I think, God, this is not fun at all.

So my son, he is obsessed with emptying the dishwasher, which cracks me up because most people, myself included, do not love emptying the dishwasher. Most people are like, this is a pretty mundane task that I have to do. But he runs over whenever I open it up and he's so excited when I let him help.

And I watch not only that but how curious he is about the food and the drinks that his father and I deem as off limits for him. And just out of pure habit, we didn't intend to do this, we started calling some things like, no, this is an adult beverage, you can't have that at such a young age.

And I'm not necessarily talking about alcohol. We do this sometimes around coffee or soda or juice. And what happens, as soon as we say it's not for him, it piques his curiosity. He wants to do what he sees the people

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around him doing. He wants to drink the thing that mom and dad are drinking, that we're saying no, you're not allowed to have that.

We inadvertently give him these thoughts that create mystique, and they create curiosity. And one of the things that's talked about a lot is what happens when you make alcohol a non-event for kids. What happens when you let kids taste alcohol and show them it's not a big deal and this is how we drink it and this is how we consume it, this is how it's part of our family.

How doing that doesn't necessarily create this kind of mental environment, it doesn't give these kids these same thoughts of like, oh no, that's not for you. Now, I just want to say that there have been a lot of studies on this, and I don't think there's one kind of right or wrong answer when it comes to should you offer alcohol to kids, should you not do it.

A lot of people have a lot of different opinions, a lot of different comfort levels with this. And I also don't think that doing so is a magic bullet or is going to make it so if you introduce it to kids at a young age and you show them that it's normal and you show them as drinking is kind of a cultural or family activity, maybe with a meal, that that means they're not going to overdrink later in life.

There are some studies that show that doing this can have a positive impact. So there was a study I was reading that looked at families in Italy and it showed that when young people were allowed to drink alcohol with meals when they were growing up, they were less likely to binge-drink later in life.

But again, this isn't true across the board because the think-feel-act cycle is going to look different for different people regardless of how or when alcohol was introduced to you. What I want you to consider though is that our desire is imprinted on us.

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Our desire to drink and the thoughts that we have about alcohol, we learn this from a very, very young age. And what I want you to pay attention to is what thoughts you adopted, what thoughts were imprinted on your brain that have affected your temptation, maybe still to this day affect your desire. And maybe you adopted those thoughts well before you started drinking.

All of your beliefs around alcohol are going to affect not only why you drink but how much you drink. And a thought like, "It's off limits," or, "It's allowed," or, "It's normal to drink in front of the TV or drinking only happens at meals," these thoughts, not only do they get programmed unconsciously into your brain, they're going to impact the habit and you have to be willing to do the work to uncover them and examine them, see how they're impacting your drinking and then decide, hey, what do I want to keep and what do I want to change?

So that really is the first thing. It's really understanding why it is you have the desire and it's not because of the drink in front of you. It's not because of the properties of alcohol. It's everything, all of the thoughts and beliefs about drinking and what you make it mean. That's really creating your desire.

Now second, you need to understand the permission that you're giving yourself. You need to understand this especially when you realize, hey, I don't really like the relationship that I've developed with alcohol. So maybe you find yourself drinking more often than you want, or more than you want in a sitting. Maybe you find yourself bingeing.

So there's understanding why you have the desire in the first place, and then there's understanding why when you don't like the results, why do you keep going? Why do you continue on?

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Again, we're very quick to say, oh, it runs in families or there's something wrong with your brain. But that's not really what's going on when you look at the think-feel-act cycle. What's going on is something that I've talked about on the podcast called the Rolodex of excuses. This idea that your brain's going to flip through a Rolodex of excuses until it finds one that's like, the right number.

It's just calling these excuses and then it lands on one that it's like, oh yeah, that sounds like a good one, that's the permission I need to drink. You have to be onto the fact that this is always happening behind the scenes. And it might sound like, "I'll be good, I'll only have one."

Now, maybe you have lots of evidence that this isn't the case, yet you keep believing I'll only have one, or I deserve it, I've had a terrible day, or it's been a hard week, or it's a party, it's a celebration, it's vacation.

A lot of times people when they start doing the work with me, they will say, "Rachel, there's no thought there. I know you're always talking about the think-feel-act cycle but there wasn't a thought. I was just watching TV and suddenly I just found myself headed to the kitchen to go get a glass of wine."

And know that it can feel like that. It has felt like that for me in the past too. Like I don't even know why I decided to drink. But trust me, there is always a thought and a feeling to be found and you can find it.

Maybe you're sitting at your desk at work and suddenly you're imagining pouring a glass of wine when you get home. It can feel like it's totally out of the blue, but again, once you start applying this work, once you start understanding, listen, my desire doesn't just happen, it's connected to a thought, my drinking doesn't just happen, it's connected to this whole cycle, you start to really understand why it is that just stopping isn't going to change the habit.

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Once you start paying attention to your thoughts and your feelings, you realize, oh my gosh, they're always there, they're always at work. So maybe you say someone on TV drinking, and you had a totally unconscious thought like, "I want one too," or, "That looks good."

Or maybe you were at work feeling frazzled or stressed out and your brain has learned unconsciously, oh, when I'm frazzled and stressed out, those are the days I get to go home and open up a bottle of wine. So understanding this is so important to see why just stopping won't change the habit because you can interrupt the habit by just saying no, no, no, I'm not allowed, I can't do this.

But it's not actually going to get to that deeper layer of why you have that desire. And paying attention to all of those excuses, understanding that your drinking just doesn't happen, that's what helps you do it.

So you understand why you have the desire, you understand the excuses that you make, the justifications, and then the third piece to really do this deeper layer of changing, transforming the habit is to take responsibility for how you feel always and your ability to shift that.

And I will tell you, this is the part most importantly where just say no, this mantra or just say no, I'm just saying no tonight, it's not going to help you. Because when you just say no to a drink, you are not doing the work to actually change and take responsibility for how you feel in the moment and how you want to feel.

So sure, you'll be able to train your brain when you use just say no not to expect a drink at five o'clock or when you're at a dinner. But you haven't changed that underlying desire. This is why people can go a long period of time without drinking and still feel like they're missing out and still have all this desire.

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Just stopping won't help you do the deep work of challenging all those excuses, especially if you're someone who wants to learn how to drink less. Because most times, people, when they just try to stop, they just try to interrupt the habit, they're just doing it by saying I can't, I can't, I can't, I can't, I'm not allowed to drink.

And that can work for a while but eventually, it doesn't work anymore because it's not true. Telling yourself that you can't do something when you actually have free will, when you actually can always choose to drink, it gets you to that place where eventually you're like, God, screw it, who cares.

And denying that you have this free will, denying that it's actually a choice that you're making by telling yourself I'm not allowed, eventually, what most people find is that when they do drink, when they do decide to drink, they end up going overboard because they've been resisting all this desire the whole time.

They've been telling themselves that drinking isn't allowed instead of embracing no, I can always choose to do it but I'm choosing not to and here's why. So I can have a different relationship with my desire.

Changing the habit really on the deepest levels means assuming responsibility for how you feel. And the fact that you have the power to change how you feel in any moment without a drink.

This is the deepest layer of work that most people never do because we just don't even realize we can do it. No one teaches us we can do it. No one teaches us that we actually are creating our own experience.

So what we end up doing is handing over our experience of dinner, or time after work, or the weekend, or the football game, or the party, or the

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networking event, we hand over that experience to the drink in the glass or the food in the plate and we say hey, you're in charge.

So many people that I work with, they come to the 30-day challenge, and they want to prove that they don't have to drink, and I get it. I understand why they have that desire, especially if it feels kind of compulsive. Proving that you can say no is powerful but you're really just scratching the surface.

You have to move beyond proving that you can say no to teaching yourself that you are in charge of your experience. You're in charge of your enjoyment. Not the drink. And when you do that, that is when you're changing the habit on the deepest level.

Now, all of us can do it. But most of us have no idea. I certainly had no idea. I didn't know how to come home from a stressful day of work and relax without a drink. I didn't know how to show up at a party and feel comfortable and at ease without a drink in my hand.

I was always handing over responsibility to how I felt to that wine glass. I know when people are stuck here because they will report going to a dinner party or going to the family picnic and not drinking and they'll report to me, they'll say, "Yeah, it was fine."

And I will challenge them on this. I'll say okay, that's great, you did it, you proved that you could do it, but it needs to be more than just fine. Your experience needs to be more than just fine. And they'll say, no, it was good. And then I'll ask them, listen, did you enjoy yourself just as much if not more without a drink?

And that's when they look at me a little bit like, is this woman crazy? They look at me like what are you even talking about? Is that even possible? Because we aren't taught that that is what is available to us. We aren't

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taught that our enjoyment, our pleasure in any situation is something that we have the ability completely on our own to transform.

Instead, we head into situations, and we think that our experience just happens to us. So let's see if I like this meal, let's see if I enjoy this party, let's see if I like these people. We assume whether or not we enjoy something just happens to us rather than being created by what's happening in our mind.

You create your experience of enjoyment and pleasure. You do that with the think-feel-act cycle. And it's so much more enjoyable to go through life knowing that you can do this.

Now listen, that doesn't mean that you're happy all the time. That doesn't mean that you enjoy everything, and you like every person and every activity and every party. I certainly don't. But I know that my experience of it is created by what's happening in my mind. That is the place of ultimate power.

Because when I think it's just happening to me, then of course it's like, okay, well I don't know, what am I going to do, I'm not having a lot of fun, I'm not really enjoying myself, I'm not feeling relaxed, I'm kind of bored. That's when we turn to alcohol, that's when we turn to food.

It becomes our kind of go-to way to entertain ourselves. We don't realize that not only do we have this power, but that we've been outsourcing our enjoying or our relaxation to a drink. The drink will make the meal better, the drink will make this person easier to be around, the drink will make this party more enjoyable. It's such a disempowering mindset.

And I will tell you, this is the deep, deep work of habit change and why just deciding to stop drinking, to focus on just say no isn't actually probably going to get you where you want to go. Because when you do that, you're

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not looking at your thoughts that create temptation. You're not looking at your thoughts that are creating permission. And you're definitely not looking at the thoughts that are blocking your enjoyment.

This is when I see people really blow their mind with this work, when they realize how much power they have not just to say no to a drink but to change their experience of not drinking. To change their experience of being around other people and coming home from work simply by noticing the thoughts that are getting in the way and learning how to change them.

This is why just stopping is not enough to change the habit. It's not going to transform the habit because it doesn't get to this deeper layer. Yes, you can say no but then what? For most people, saying no to a drink, it's like the beginning and end of their journey.

Like I said no, moving on. But I will tell you this; if you're not enjoying yourself, if you still have desire, if you still feel like you're missing out, if you still feel like yeah, it was fine, if you still feel like you don't really trust yourself, all of that will feel pretty miserable and none of that is necessary.

And this is what I want you to see. Stopping is not enough to truly change the habit. The deeper work comes from examining your mind, understanding that you weren't born with the desire to drink, it was imprinted on you from a young age, and you can change that.

Drinking doesn't just happen. Your excuses, your justifications, your reasoning is why you say to that first drink and then why you say yes for more. And finally, assuming responsibility for your enjoyment, for your experience, for how you feel, this is how you actually transform the habit instead of just interrupting it.

Alright, that's it for today. I will see you next week.

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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.