

Ep #238: When Drinking is Just a 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 238.

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.

Welcome back, my friends. I want you to consider this question. Why did you say yes to the drink? Why did you have more than you intended to? I ask these questions of people all the time, and it's not a question of judgment. It's a question of curiosity.

And so often, what I hear people kind of fall into is the response, "I don't know. It's just a habit." And you know what, I talk about habits a lot here. We're talking about habits all the time on the podcast. So the idea that your desire to drink, it doesn't just appear out of nowhere, the decision to drink doesn't just happen, you weren't born craving that glass of wine, you taught yourself to want it.

You created a habit. And so when you crave a drink at five o'clock, or when you're at a party or you're at a fancy restaurant or you're watching a baseball game, the idea is that that habit was created. Those things were not triggers for your desire. You taught your brain to expect the reward at certain times, places, with specific people, while you're doing certain things, when you feel certain emotions.

This is how habits work. Habits are how the brain learns. But sometimes, when we fall into this I don't know, it's just a habit, what we end up doing is we use this idea of the brain learning to crave a drink, we use it against ourselves, and we actually block our ability to change.

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Now, I just want to say kind of upfront because I know some of you will be thinking about this. It's like, well, what's the difference between a habit and a disease and a learned behavior?

And I will tell you this; there is a lot of controversy in the medical community and in the harm reduction community about whether or not drinking too much, feeling compulsive around alcohol, is it a disease? Is it a habit? Is it a learned behavior? What is it?

I actually talk about this in my book, *Why Can't I Drink Like Everyone Else?* So I talk about the kind of most common frameworks that we are taught about understanding people who drink too much. So the two most common ones are the disease model and the character defect model.

So the disease model says okay, listen, if you drink too much and you can't figure out how to change it, it's because you have a disease. It's not your fault, you're just sick, you have an illness, which means that your brain doesn't function properly. So there are normal people who can handle alcohol, their brain can handle it, but then there are people who have a disease and alcohol renders them powerless, and the only cure is to remove the substance entirely.

Now, I'm going to tell you this; this is a very common framework for understanding why it is that people struggle with alcohol and struggle to say no. And I actually think that there is some appeal to this idea because when we put it in the framework of a disease, it's often kind of coupled with it's not your fault.

And so often, when people are engaging in a behavior that they don't like, and yet they don't really understand how to change, even though they can see that there are negative consequences, it feels like well, the only way that I can relate to this and relate to myself doing this and drinking too much is through self-abuse, is by beating myself up.

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So we blame ourselves and we judge ourselves harshly about how much we drank last night, and we call ourselves stupid for not being able to learn our lesson, and that sucks. It feels terrible. I spent a very long time doing this.

So there's some kind of appeal a little bit to this idea of hey, it's not your fault. Because most people don't know how to relate to things that they are doing in their life that they don't necessarily like, they don't know how to relate to it in a way other than self-abuse.

Now of course, you hear me talk about this all the time. Blame and shame is not going to get you to change your drinking. Not in the long term. It might get you to stop for a while or to say no or a while or "be good" for a while, but it's just not going to work in the long run. It doesn't.

What I think is this model doesn't really make sense. Unless you have a brain injury, you have a brain that properly functions. You have a higher brain, you have a lower brain, you have a brain that was designed to seek out rewards in its environment.

The actual problem is not your brain. The problem is that you haven't been taught anything about how your brain works. The vast majority of us, we have zero knowledge about how the brain works or how rewards work in the brain, or how habits form, or how highly concentrated substances impact the brain.

We aren't taught that our thoughts and our feelings work together to give rise to the decisions that we make in life. We're literally taught nothing. We're given the most powerful brain in the world and there's no instruction manual, there's no guidance whatsoever.

What most people are really taught is just you should be able to drink normally. Don't drink too much and PS, you should be able to drink normally. I just think it's so crazy that this is basically all the information that

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we give people. It's like telling people who struggle with food, "Hey, don't eat so much. Just eat like a normal person."

Meanwhile, we're living in an environment where food has gone from survival and transformed into entertainment. And everything has been supersized, and humans have made food sweeter and saltier than it ever was before.

So we've increased the reward that our brain gets from eating. And it's advertised to us constantly. And we get all these messages growing up where we are taught, hey you know what, it's a good thing to clean your plate, and you shouldn't let food go to waste, which by the way, those ideas may have been great when people were living in a time of food scarcity, but they're not working so well when we live in a world of food abundance.

So in this environment, the idea that people should just know how to eat and know how to eat normally, it's bonkers. It doesn't make any sense. But the same is true for drinking. Did anyone ever show you how to drink? I want you to think about that.

Did anyone ever show you how to drink? In my case, nobody showed me how to drink. People showed me how to get drunk. I remember going to this party when I was in high school, I wasn't drinking then, I was a sophomore. And I was at this party, and there was one of the junior girls who was there, and she was so drunk.

And I really hadn't seen someone that drunk before. And I remember someone said to me, "Oh yeah, she spent the whole day not eating so she would get drunk faster." And I remember thinking like, oh, is that a thing?

I really want you to consider, did anyone ever show you how to drink? Did anyone ever talk about how concentrated rewards work in your brain? Did anyone ever teach you about the think-feel-act cycle? Or did they teach you things like you know, beer before liquor, never been sicker?

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That's what we learn. We don't learn about how the brain works or how rewards work, or how our thoughts and our feelings that we unconsciously have influence our drinking. So I just think without looking at this entire environment, the idea of saying like, oh, it's just a disease, it's just an illness, it doesn't really make any sense to me.

And not only that, but that disease explanation, it often goes hand in hand with the character defect explanation, which really does not make sense. They really should not go together but so often they do. So on the one hand we're saying you have a disease, there's something wrong with your brain, it's not your fault.

And then on the other hand, we characterize people who drink more than they want to and people who struggle with alcohol, a lot of times we characterize them as well, you know, they just prioritize pleasure over everything else, including their wellbeing and the wellbeing of their loved ones, they don't care about their loved ones, they're selfish, they are master manipulators, they're liars.

And then coupled with all of that, and that is a pretty heavy burden to wear, then on top of that we say the way out is just to acknowledge all your defects of characterize and atone for your wrongs and all your misdeeds. You have to work at being a better person. This is the message of 12 steps. Be a better person. That's the path.

The problem is that listen, I'm all for being a better person. It just doesn't teach you anything about your brain. It doesn't help you understand why you overdo things, why you have all this desire. And by the way, you're not a bad person when you drink too much. You're not a bad person when you make a commitment, and you don't follow through.

You're not a bad person when you overdo anything in life or when things feel compulsive or like you're not fully in control. I don't care if it's drinking

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or eating or shopping or whatever. These aren't character defects. These are features of the brain.

So people will say okay, you're an alcoholic, you have a disease, you need to get help, you need to go to AA. But let's just really look at what that looks like in practice. If we really believe that drinking too much is a disease, shouldn't we treat it like a disease?

So think about it. If you have heart disease, so blood isn't flowing properly through the heart, maybe you put in a stent to open up an artery, or maybe you try to reduce your stress levels. If you have a lung disease, your body isn't getting enough oxygen from lungs, maybe you need to use an inhaler and reduce inflammation. Maybe you need to try breathing exercises.

If you have kidney disease and your body can't filter waste properly, maybe you need dialysis. Maybe you need to change your diet. But then we look at the "disease" of drinking and we say no, the solution is just to stop drinking forever and try to be a better person. It doesn't make any sense.

My approach and what I teach here, and by the way, it's not something that I came up with, is that drinking is a learned behavior. It is a habit, one that you've taught yourself. It is a pattern that you have built in your brain unconsciously, which is why it can be very challenging to start to undo it when you know nothing about how your brain works, or nothing about how habits form, and you just think, well, I should just know better or I should just be a good person, and then I wouldn't do this.

But even though you built it unconsciously, it's something that you can start to consciously deconstruct. But now here's the thing; that brings me back to what I hear from people. When people say okay, well, why did you say yes to the drink? Why did you have more than you wanted? And people will say to me, "I don't know. I can't learn my lesson, I'm just an all or nothing person, I just can't stop once I start, I have an addictive personality," all these answers are about blame.

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But here's the thing; I want you to relate to the decisions that you make around alcohol without self-abuse and instead with genuine curiosity. And when you blame yourself and when you say I don't know, it's just a habit, even though that's what I believe, it is just a habit, when you use that as your answer, guess what happens? It shuts down inquiry.

It's like saying I don't know, it's just a reflex. It's like, when the doctor taps your knee with that little rubber hammer and your leg jerks forward, it's a reflex. Now, here's the thing; a doctor tapping your knee and having a reflex in your knee and you picking up a drink is not the same thing.

When your body is managing a critical function without relying on a conscious part of your brain, that's a reflex. Drinking is not a reflex. Habits can be reflexive, but they aren't a reflex. They don't bypass the brain. A knee-jerk reflex bypasses the brain.

Tapping on your knee sends a signal via the sensory nerve to the spinal cord, and the spinal cord sends a signal back that responds down via a motor nerve and your knee jerks. That little kick happens. That all happens in under a millisecond, and it bypasses the brain.

Communication is happening in your body between your spinal cord and your nerves. That's a reflex. You don't have to think about moving your knee when the doctor hits it. It just happens. It's outside of your control. But guess what, you do have to think about drinking.

It doesn't bypass your brain. That's what this work is about. Learning how to slow down the habit so that you can see the think-feel-act cycle unfold and identify the thought and the feeling that gave rise to the decision to drink and gave rise to the decision to have more.

But saying, "I don't know, it's just a habit," it's not going to help you do this. It's going to shut down curiosity. So I think it's important that we understand that yeah, this is a learned behavior. This is a habit that you taught yourself

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and you did it unconsciously. But then you can't turn around and then use that explanation against yourself.

"I don't know, it's just a habit." I think people do this because they believe it's a way to avoid blame. Like I can't be blamed for my knee jerking forward when you tap my knee, it's a reflex. I think sometimes that's what happens when people say, "I don't know, it's just a habit."

They're trying to get at the same thing like it's not my fault, I can't be blamed. Because we're so used to oh, if I take responsibility for something, if I was making a decision, if there was a thought, if my brain was involved, then if I made a decision that I don't ultimately like the next day, then I have to beat myself up. But that's actually not the case.

What you're really saying when you say I don't know, it's just a habit, you're saying it just happened. My drinking just happened. And you know that's the opposite of what I teach. It can feel like it just happened, it can feel like there wasn't a thought or a feeling there because of course, when you start out doing this work, it will be very unconscious.

But they're always there, and you can always unearth them. You can always uncover them. And in fact, we can understand why the reflex happens with the knee, but you know what? You can't stop your sensory nerves and your motor nerves from talking to your spinal cord. That truly is outside of your control. You can't change a reflex, but you can change a habit.

I want you to think about it that way. The reflexes are built into the operating system. You were designed to have these reflexes. Drinking was not built into your operating system. You did not come out of the womb desiring a drink. You did not come out of the womb craving a glass of wine when you got home from work.

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You weren't even designed to drink. The human brain was not designed to drink. It wasn't designed to handle this much of a concentrated reward. It's not part of the operating system. And I think that this is good news. Not because it means okay, then you shouldn't do it. Just because you get to understand oh, it's not wired into me. It's not part of my survival. It's not something that I actually need to do. But also, it's not outside of my control. It's not like a reflex.

The habit of drinking isn't a reflex. It isn't a sign that your brain isn't working properly. It's not a disease. It's not a character flaw. It's a learned behavior and one you can change.

So really, for everyone out there, when you ask yourself the questions, why did I say yes to that drink? Why did I drink more than I planned, or I intended? Why did I have that much? Please be very, very careful with how you answer that. And notice if you're falling into the trap of using the habit explanation against yourself.

Instead of just saying I don't know, it's just a habit, the better thing to say is it's a habit that I created and now I'm working to find the thought and feeling and learn how to change it. 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.

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