

Ep #252: Alcohol as Neutral 2.0



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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 252.

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, so we are talking about something that comes up a lot on the podcast, but I haven't done an episode specifically devoted to this in a long time. We're talking about alcohol being morally neutral. Neither good or bad.

So early on, when I started this podcast, one of my early episodes, I think it was number 35, introduced this concept, this idea. And the point was really to help all of you start to understand and see that your judgment of drinking too much and judging that as being a bad thing, and also judging saying no and abstaining as being a good or virtuous thing is actually part of the problem.

This is something that I didn't understand for the longest time. And I went through many iterations of, "Oh God, I was so stupid, why did I do that?" And trying to convince myself that alcohol was bad for me, and it was poison, and I was constantly labeling it as good or bad, right, or wrong.

And what I didn't understand that all of these judgments, not only were they optional because it truly is neutral, but they were actually fueling the habit for me. So just think about when you said to yourself, "I've been so good all week, I really deserve a treat."

We do this with a glass of wine, we do this with the bag of chips, we do this a lot. We attach the label of being good because we've been saying no to our desire. Now, the problem with that is it furthers this idea, this belief that

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saying no to an urge, saying no to your craving is a form of suffering. It's a penance.

And what do we want to do when we suffer? God, that sucked, where's my treat? Haven't I suffered enough? Haven't I earned a little reward here? Here's the problem; if saying no to your desire is always a form of suffering, it's always a way to be good to say no to your desire, and guess what's going to happen? You're always going to crave a reward.

There's also the problem when it comes to labeling alcohol and labeling how we use it as good or bad, right, or wrong, that often this label can be used as unconscious justification to just go all out.

So I would have this thought like, "Listen, if I'm going to be bad, we might as well be really bad. We might as well make being bad worth it." Telling yourself that drinking is bad, it can actually lead to justifying drinking more.

And this was something that I wrestled with. Again, I was so often congratulating myself for being good when I would say no, and then I would get to the end of the week or the end of the month and I was like, I'm sick of this. I'm sick of being good, I'm sick of resisting my desire, I'm sick of saying no all the time, I'm sick of feeling restricted, let's just have a treat, let's be bad.

And you know what, we're going to throw away all that hard work, which is another misconception, this idea of like, okay, if you said no, said no, said no, and then you say yes, well, you have to just go back to the beginning, you have to start all over again.

So if I'm going to throw away all this hard work, I don't want to throw away all that hard work on five ounces of wine. No, I want to be bad. Let's drink the bottle. It's kind of like rebelling in a way, which it seems silly, right?

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I was an adult. I was not living under my parents' roof. I was not restricted in terms of what I could or couldn't do, or how much I was allowed to drink. Yet, so often, what I was trying to do when I was trying to change the habit of drinking and trying to rein myself in, I really went at it by putting a lot of rules in place.

That's what so many people do, not just around drinking but with all habits. We think that the solution is okay, I just need to set some rules and I just need to practice having willpower, and following them and being disciplined.

Now, the problem is these are rules that we don't particularly enjoy following. I always say to people when they start the work in the 30-day challenge, and the work always starts with the break. I always remind people, listen, the break has to be a tool, not a rule.

It's not just about semantics. You have to drop the idea of okay, I just got to make it through the 30 days, I'm just not allowed to drink for 30 days. No, that's part of the problem. You have to release the language of I'm not allowed, I can't.

You have to release that and see, no, I'm taking a break as a way to reveal my mind, as a way to get insight into the habit. The moment that you take a break, it gives you so much information about how the habit works, and how you respond to your urges, and the emotions that are actually fueling a lot of your desire.

But only if you use the break as a tool, rather than like, okay, I just got to follow this rule and be good. Labeling drinking as good or bad, it only keeps you stuck in the habit. This is what I didn't understand.

Labeling your behavior when you're drinking as, oh God, I was good, or I was bad, listen, that's not much better. As soon as you think, "Oh God, I really did something bad, I really behaved badly last night when I was

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drinking,” guess what happens? Guess what you’re going to do? You’re going to hide.

You’re going to want to forget what happened. You’re going to want to look away. That’s the result of trying to shame yourself and telling yourself that you were bad. Labeling yourself as bad, it doesn’t actually create change. It creates shame.

And shame to me is an emotion that I kind of liken to crawling under the covers. I don’t want to look, I don’t want to see what’s happening out there. I just want to hide and pretend that things didn’t happen.

I remember so many times, so many times after waking up after a night of having way too much to drink, and my thoughts immediately went to, “God, you’re such an idiot, why are you so stupid? Why can’t you learn your lesson? Why can’t you rein it in like your best friend or these other people? What’s wrong with you?”

All of those thoughts felt so true to me at the time. But they were all just judgments. They were all leading me to the same conclusion that how much you do or don’t drink is some sort of reflection of your character.

All those judgments creates so much shame for me. And that shame didn’t actually help me change. That’s the problem. I really do think too many of us are raised to believe that shame is going to lead to change. It doesn’t work that way.

It just led for me, trying to pretend that it didn’t happen. I wanted to just erase the night from my mind. I didn’t want to go back and understand, hey, why did that happen? I just was like, I just got to be good moving forward.

But no amount of being good is going to change the habit. Because trying to be good and say no because you’re being good, the underlying belief is that somehow, being a virtuous person can trump desire and your urges.

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Virtue isn't going to help you do squat. What you need actually are to learn tools that will help you respond differently to your urges and your cravings, and when you feel uncomfortable and when you feel stressed out and when you feel bored and you're used to hey, I just drink over these emotions.

I'll tell you, recently inside the challenge, I was coaching someone, and she was really struggling with how she behaved one night when she had gone out with her family, and she had gotten drunk. And her knee-jerk response, much like mine had been for a very long time was like, this was so embarrassing, I can't believe I did this, what's wrong with me? What was I thinking? Why can't I learn my lesson? Why was so I stupid? All of that judgment.

And so I said listen, let's just look at this together. Let's just try to find out what led to your behavior. What's your hypothesis right now? Right now what she was telling me was like, I don't know, I was stupid, something's wrong with me, I just can't learn my lesson.

But I said to her, let's just see if that pans out. I talk to you guys all the time about how your actions, whatever you do or don't do, it doesn't just happen. The drink just sits there, the food just sits there. You don't act to pick it up until there's something happening inside of you, until you have a thought, until you have a feeling.

That's what the think-feel-act cycle is all about. And that's not only true of the things that you consume. It's true of everything you do or don't do in life. That's the beauty of learning about the think-feel-act cycle is suddenly you get this little equation that helps you understand things that could have felt mystifying in the past.

I will tell you this though, when I introduce this idea to people, when I say okay, your drinking just didn't happen, a lot of times, people will start out like, okay, but listen, I was already buzzed, or I was already drunk.

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Being buzzed, being drunk, the fact that you already had alcohol in your system didn't make you drink more. I think this is really important to understand and I think many people, myself included, really can struggle with this idea.

We're so used to blaming being drunk, blaming alcohol for our behavior. How many times have you said, "I just did that because I was drunk," or, "I said that because I was drunk," or, "I acted inappropriate because I had been drinking," or, "I made out with that person because I was wasted?"

I can't even tell you how often I blamed alcohol for the things that I did. But listen, the reason that I was doing that was because the alternative felt so much worse. Because if it wasn't alcohol made me do it, being drunk made me do it, then it was just me.

And if it was my fault, then maybe I really was stupid, maybe I really was irresponsible, maybe I really was a bad person. That's what I believed. I think that's why I for so long was stuck like, I don't know, once I start drinking, it just happens.

I wanted in a way to blame alcohol because it felt terrible blaming me. Now, why does this happen? Why do we feel like we need to blame anyone here? Well, because we so often, as a society, ascribe people's behavior to their character and their morality.

We tell ourselves that the reason people do things is because, well, they're good people or they're bad people and that's the answer. But of course it's not. I really want you to think about that. Of course that's not the explanation.

The reason that someone does something or doesn't do something, it's not because it's written in their character. It has to do with what's happening in their mind and how they were feeling. Two things that most people spend their lives being completely unconscious to.

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Most people will walk around saying I don't know, I don't know why I do half the things I do. I don't know why I signed up for a gym membership and then I never go, and I can't motivate myself to get out of bed. I don't know why I snapped at my kid; I don't know why I lost my temper in traffic. I don't know why I lost my patience with a colleague. I don't know why I keep procrastinating on the things that I say are so important to me.

In so many parts of our lives, not just drinking, our behavior, our actions are often very perplexing. Why did I do that? Why did I behave that way? Why don't I follow through on the things that I say that I deeply want? In so many areas, we feel really confused about our actions.

But then when it comes to drinking, it's like, well, I know, I know why I did that, because I was dumb, I was stupid, I just can't learn my lesson. The think-feel-act cycle doesn't stop working the moment that you take a sip of wine or beer. It's still operating.

Now listen, of course, can alcohol lower your inhibitions? Yeah. You might have less of your prefrontal cortex weighing in on the pros and cons of whether or not you should do this behavior. But think-feel-act, it's still there, it's still operating.

Most people are unconscious of it when they're sober. So yeah, you're probably pretty unconscious of it once you've been drinking. It doesn't mean you can't start to discover how it's working behind the scenes.

And if you feel shame about what you did or how much you drank and then you chalk it up to being stupid, the problem is you miss the opportunity to actually make that discovery, to actually be curious and say, hey, why did that happen?

The thought, "I'm stupid, I should know better, I'm an idiot," they just create shame. And I promise you, they were not the thoughts in the moment that

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had you pour another glass or spill a secret or send that text message or dance on the bar or sleep with someone that you wish you hadn't.

No, all of those actions were created by different sentences. It's not about you being a good or bad person. It's about what's happening in your mind, everything that you can't currently see, but that you can get a window of insight into.

And to me, this is the most powerful thing. To be able to see that even though I may not like the behavior, I may not want to repeat it, it only happened because of an unconscious sentence in my mind. It has nothing to do with me or who I am as a person.

And I may not have been able in that moment when I was drinking to really weigh the pros and cons because guess what, I didn't even know that sentence was there. I didn't even know what think-feel-act cycle was operating because my inhibitions were lowered.

But still, it was just because of a sentence. Not because you were bad, or broken, or stupid, or there's something wrong with you. Now, I know that some of you are like, okay, fine it was just a sentence, but who cares? I still didn't want to drink that much, I still didn't want to behave that way.

But that's the thing I want you to understand. If you're trying to shame yourself into behaving better, you're not understanding the real reason the behavior happened in the first place.

You're actually totally unconscious to the cause, and trying to use the solution of being good that doesn't actually work. Because you can't really change something that you can't see. And that's how most people operate.

Most people, when it comes to the habit of drinking, they're operating with very limited insight into what is going on because they are so used to

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making how much they drink and the decisions that they made be a reflection of who they are as a person.

They're so used to labeling themselves as being bad or stupid, or should have learned my lesson by now. That's what I want you to see. The power here in really understanding that not only is alcohol neither good nor bad, but you're not good when you say no, and you're not bad when you say yes.

The power of understanding this and seeing alcohol as morally neutral is the power of actually getting insight into how the habit works. 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.