

Ep #258: When Not Drinking Feels Like Punishment



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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 258.

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.

All right, welcome back everyone, we've got a really good topic today. I am talking about when not drinking feels like punishment, and you know what I mean. I know a lot of you can relate to this. I could relate to this for a very long time. So, you make a commitment not to drink, maybe you're taking a break for a week, month, or a year, maybe you just promised yourself, you know, that tonight you were going to say no. Then, the moment comes when it's time for you to make good on that commitment in saying no to your desire feels like punishment.

This is something that I work with people on all the time inside Take A Break. Because I deeply believe that if not drinking feels like punishment, saying no to another round feels like punishment; if saying no to your desire feels terrible; you can't create the change you want. You can't change the habit or your relationship with alcohol. Now, listen, that's not to say that when you're starting out, saying no should be a breeze. That's not to say that it won't be uncomfortable at first, that's normal, but it certainly shouldn't stay that way.

Because something that feels like punishment forever is not sustainable, and I say this as someone who spent an entire year in my early 20s not drinking. I had none of the tools that I teach all of you on the podcast. And I will tell you, that entire year, it was very hard for me to shake the feeling that I was punishing myself. Because I didn't know how to allow urges, I didn't know how to use the think, feel, and act cycle or how to understand

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the habit on the deepest level and really understand all the ways in which it was helping me. All I knew was to, you know, grit my teeth, and white knuckle it, and just say no, no, no, no, and that felt like punishment for me. Feeling like you're being punished is just not a sustainable pathway to change. Nothing that feels like a punishment will ever last; maybe it will last for a while, right? Maybe you can make do on feeling virtuous for saying no. I know I tried that route. I tried to do that.

So, I would watch people drinking, and I'd think to myself, oh, Rachel, you're being so good, I'm going to feel so good tomorrow morning. But I think humans want more than a life of being in good moral standing. At least I do. I want a life of fun, playfulness, connection, enjoyment, pleasure, and feeling like I can just be me. I can just be comfortable in my own skin no matter what I'm doing or who I'm with. But the problem is that I had unknowingly taught my brain over the years that having a drink was a way to get all of that. And one of the mistakes that I repeatedly made in my own journey to change my relationship with alcohol was relying on feeling virtuous to keep myself going.

Relying on thoughts like I am being so good, so healthy, look at all these people being so sloppy, not me. I'm here on the moral high ground with all my virtue. I mean, it sounds kind of awful to say it. But I really didn't know another way. I didn't know what to do with my desire. I feel like I had so much of it. So, I just tried to fight desire with virtue. But if you're in a fight with your desire, you're always going to lose. Your willpower is eventually going to give out. So, why do so many people rely on virtue as a way to say no to their desire to drink?

I really think that's the important thing for everyone to understand. I believe the answer is something I talk about on this podcast all of the time. So, I talk a lot about how humans have cast alcohol, drinking, and how much we drink; we've cast it in this moral light. We've made it a sign of our goodness or badness. Now, you'll hear me say this a lot, alcohol is not good or bad.

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It's a natural by-product of life on earth. Things grow, things decompose, things ferment; when they ferment, you get alcohol. But people will say, on the one hand, oh, no, it's a sin, poison, and scourge on humanity. Or on the other hand, it's a gift from the gods, the sacrament; it's a path to inspiration and creativity. Alcohol is none of these things.

When you really understand the think, feel, and act cycle, when you really understand that what you're thinking and how you're feeling about something drives what you do with it, you start to understand that believing these thoughts, no matter what side you're on, no matter if you're saying it's a sin or it's a gift from the gods, believing these thoughts are going to create so many problems for you when you try to change the habit. So, humans have moralized alcohol, but we've moralized how much people drink. We've turned the decision to drink and how much someone drinks into a sign about who someone is. So, think about it this way, like, how many times have you heard someone say, yeah, it's weird not to drink, or shameful to drink too much?

We've created this whole goldilocks story where you have to find the perfect quantity to confirm; hey, I am one of the normal ones, right? I'm like everyone else. Why do we do this? Why do humans do this? I think it's because we're so desperate to confirm, you know, who's in the clan? Am I in the clan? Are we all together? It's a very old, very human desire to want to know that you belong. Belonging was a big part of survival, and the thing is, I just didn't understand any of this. I remember hearing things like, you can't trust someone who doesn't drink. And then, at the same time, hearing things like, well, if you drink too much, you know it's a character defect. You have to take a moral inventory and, you know, admit to your sins, and make amends for all your wrongs.

So, when you're in the place of desiring to change your relationship with alcohol and perhaps struggling to figure out how to do that, it really can feel like you're walking a tight rope. It really can feel like, oh my god, like, I just

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have to be able to figure out how to do this the right way; otherwise, what does it mean about me? It's why so often, people feel like they're punishing themselves when they say no. It becomes not just about their desire. It's about wanting to find that kind of perfect goldilocks place where they can be certain like, yeah, yeah, nothing's wrong with me. I'm one of the normal ones.

So, I talked about this the other day on a coaching call. I was talking with the person I was talking about being out at dinner and watching someone order a dirty martini while she had water. Now, maybe you loved dirty martinis, maybe you hate them, but just try to imagine someone ordering a drink that you really have a lot of desire for. And she described what happened while that person ordered the dirty martini, and she was sticking with her water. She described it as feeling like she was punishing herself. So, what we started to do is we started to really diagram out what was happening because that's what my coaching calls often really look like. Let's not just talk. Let's actually watch that think, feel, and act cycle that was unfolding in the moment. Let's watch it unfold in front of us right now.

So often what we try to do, this is what I try to do for a very long time I would have something that I wanted to change or a habit I wanted to break or a problem that I wanted to solve, and I would try to do it just in my head. But your head is what created it. You have to get your thoughts out of your head and see them with some distance. So, that you can actually be in a position to understand what's going on. So, that's why I spend a lot of coaching calls, often diagraming for people. Let's look, let's understand what was that think, feel, and act cycle for you unfolding in the moment?

And so, I was explaining, listen, someone ordering a dirty martini doesn't feel like anything until you have a thought. It doesn't feel like desire, disgust, and punishment until your brain generates a sentence. That will happen unconsciously. That's what creates the feeling.

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So, even if you love dirty martinis, the act of someone ordering one doesn't feel like a punishment until you have a thought about it. And for most people, before they learn about the think, feel, and act cycle and start doing this work, applying this work, those thoughts will be totally unconscious. They will happen so quickly and so fast. It's like they don't even know that they're there, and it really does feel like someone's drink order creates your feelings. When of course, that's never the case. That's what I wanted her to first understand. The drink just sits there. It doesn't cause how you feel. The punishment happens from what's unfolding in your mind.

The thoughts that you're unconsciously thinking that's what creates the feeling of being punished. And with this work, we can start to slow down the tape, right? We can kind of look at it in slow motion and really understand what was happening. So, we started to unpack it a little bit more. She realized that as her dinner companion ordered the dirty martini and sat there with her water, her brain offered her this thought. Why am I not ordering what I want right now? And I will just tell you when I heard her say that I can so relate to that question in so many areas of my life. I've had that myself. Why am I denying myself the thing that I desire, the thing that I want, whether it's a cocktail or a cookie, whatever it is? Why am I doing that?

And here's the important thing when you start to really study and apply this work when you're using the think, feel, and act cycle not only to understand but to change the habit when you notice your brain posing a question because that's what was happening here. Her question was, why am I not ordering what I want right now. When you notice your brain doing that, what you have to do next to answer it. I promise you, your unconscious mind was definitely answering it in the moment. When you ask yourself questions like, why can't I figure this out, why can't I drink like everyone else, how come I can't learn my lesson?

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Those questions only feel terrible because of how your mind is unconsciously answering them. When your brain poses a question, and you feel a negative emotion, whether it's guilt or shame or embarrassment or anger or isolation, whatever comes up for you--when your brain poses a question, and you then feel a negative emotion is because your unconscious mind negatively answered that question.

That answer might sound like I am different because something's wrong with me because something's wrong with my brain. Whatever your particular flavor of answer looks like, if the question feels bad when you think it, it's because the unconscious answer wasn't a good one. This is important; in order to change the habit, you have to become aware of how you answer questions like these. I used to spin on the question, why can't I drink like everyone else? It's the name of my book, right? Because that really was my deepest question. And I will tell you it felt terrible when I thought, why can't I drink like everyone else. But it felt terrible because of how I was answering it.

Of course, my unconscious answer was there must be something wrong with me. I had bought into this belief system that the world was divided, to normal drinkers on one side and alcoholics over here. Alcoholics had something wrong with them, and their brains didn't work right, and their moral compass was messed up. So, they need to do a tone for their sins and fix their character defects. The truth was, that belief system is what really caused me so much pain. Suppose I hadn't said to myself, listen. In that case, I drink the way I drink, or I drink however much I drank last night because I had sentences in my mind that I had practiced rewarding over and over again.

Sentences like, more is better, or when I drink, the real me comes out, or I deserve it, or if I'm drinking, I'll be able to relate to these people better. If I had the awareness back, then all of these sentences were actually driving the habit, and all of them were optional. I could learn how to change them.

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Well, it would have felt a whole lot better than the unconscious answer that my brain was coming up with, why can't I drink like everyone else? Which was something must be wrong with you, Rachel. Okay, so, back to the dirty martini the person I was coaching, she realized the answer to the thought, why am I not ordering what I want was actually a pretty painful answer for her. Her answer was because if I do, I'll feel bad about myself. If I drink, I'll feel bad about myself. That thought was like holding her hostage. If you do the thing you want, I will punish you later. Which, of course, guess what feels like punishment in the moment. It's like a gun being held to your head while you're trying to make a decision, so you're not making your decision from a place of free will.

Now, you can make the argument, and many people do, that someone really should feel bad when they break a commitment. You know you made a promise to yourself, you made a commitment, you went back on your word, you didn't hold up your end of the bargain, you should feel bad. Most people will tell you this, but this is where I disagree with most people. I don't believe that you can shame yourself into sustainable, long-lasting, permanent change. Here's the other thing when you're knee-deep in shame, you miss the opportunity to go back and understand the habit and what was actually happening. Because your knee jerk was just like, I don't know, I was bad, and now I deserve to be punished.

If you're not ordering a drink because you'll feel bad about yourself in the future because you know you're going to beat yourself up later, then in the moment, you can't make the decision from a place of free will. You're holding out the threat of future punishment to try to get yourself to behave. So, of course, that feels awful in the moment when you say no, not because you said no to a drink because you said no under duress. It's a terrible place to be. It's kind of like, I am damned if I do, I'm damned if I don't. You deny yourself having free will about your decision not to drink. You're not making that decision from a clean place. You're making it under threat. If you do this thing, if you order this drink, if you make good on your

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desire, I am going to beat you up, I am going to be shitty to you, I am going to remind you what a failure you are, and how you always break your promises; none of that is helpful.

Using your decisions or on alcohol as some sort of barometer of your self-worth. It just feels awful. It just keeps you on kind of high alert all the time that at any moment you know, you might screw up, and there goes all your hard work because then you're just back to being a bad person. Now, I will tell you, people hear me say this, and they think, okay, so what, I am just going to give myself a free pass to do whatever I want and drink whatever I want, that was my problem, to begin with. But that was not your problem. The problem was you didn't understand the real reason why you kept reaching for a drink. I know you think that you understood, or you understand, because we all come up with these stories. I did this too.

So, we think about why did I drink too much last night or why do I find it so hard to say no to my desire? And our brain offers us stories like I don't know. I am just someone who thinks more is better. I've always been that way, or I have always had kind of an addictive personality, it runs in my family, or I am just someone who never follows through on commitments. These stories that the brain comes up with, I mean, they're really not great. And p.s. They're not actually what's going on. All of these stories, all of the reasons that we come up with the next day for why did I drink too much, why did I break my commitment, whatever it is all of these stories that chalk up your drinking to who you are as a person because that's what those stories are really about. It's talking about who you are as a person. All it does is strip you of your power. Because now, you're explaining why you drank as the product of your essential self.

When the decision to drink is just a product of a sentence, you believed in the moment to be true, and you may not have even been aware that the sentence was there. Sentences like, this will help, this will make me feel better, I deserve it, those thoughts are not your essential self. They are not

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your character. They are sentences in your brain that you have practiced unconsciously repeatedly, and your brain has learned, hey, when we offer this sentence up, we seem to get rewarded with dopamine. That's all that's happening.

If you're punishing yourself into not drinking with the threat of beating yourself up, then the result is that your brain learns to think drinking is bad. And also, that breaking your commitments is bad, and the attend then to change the habit and change your relationship with alcohol becomes an attempt to be perfect and becomes a battle of your self-worth. It is no longer about a habit or alcohol at all anymore. It's about you, it becomes about who you are as a person, and I will tell you that is a terrible place to be in. When it feels like your goodness or badness hangs in the balance of what you consumed last night, that's terrible. And, by the way, people do this with lots of things; we do it with food and all sorts of things that we consume. When we decide to drink, just take it out of the realm of alcohol; you just make the fact that you broke a commitment. When you make that mean something about your essential self, you're never going to be able to go back and understand what happened because you're just going to be on this mission to try to prove that you're good.

The truth is if there's always the thought of punishment if that's how you're motivating yourself to say no, if you're motivating yourself by putting yourself under duress, it will always feel terrible to say no to a drink or no to another, and if it feels terrible, guess what, it makes it harder for you to change. Saying no ends up feeling like this burden you're saddled with rather than a choice you made. It's like you're telling yourself you have to say no or else I will be shitty to you, rather than what you actually need to change the habit.

What you actually need is curiosity about your desire and curiosity about your thoughts, urges beliefs about how you think alcohol, or a drink will make something better, give you relief, or whatever it is for you. If your

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worthiness is on the line, guess what happens curiosity is very quickly shut down. You don't want to be curious because you're like, no, I am bad, I just need to work on being good. I want you to make whatever decision you want to make without the threat of being mean to yourself or facing future punishment. That is the only true freedom.

Then you can actually decide what you want from a clean place. So many people I work they can't actually decide what relationship they want to have with alcohol because the decision is all about like, well, I want to be able to take it or leave it, but, like, so, deep down, I don't have to worry that something is wrong with me. When you drop the connection to morality and worthiness and this belief that how much we consume do or don't consume means something about who we are as a person, suddenly there's just so much peace around your choices rather than fear, guilt, shame, and threats. You just get to decide what is right for you.

You just get to peacefully make a decision that you feel good about and is aligned with what you deeply want. Suppose you find that you made a decision that wasn't aligned with what you wanted. In that case, you get to go back with curiosity and really slow down the tape and unpack what was there as opposed to, like, I don't know, I was just like, a screwup last night. That kind of freedom is everything. That kind of freedom is what creates lasting change.

So, listen, I really wanted to end the year with this episode because, to me, this idea that not drinking feels like punishment or that you will punish yourself based on the decisions you've made around drinking this is the thing that I watch hold so many people back. It held me back for a very long time. I felt like I was never going to get to a place of feeling like true freedom and true peace around the decisions I made. And being there and watching so many other people that I get to work with, reach that place as well, that to me, there's nothing better.

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So, the last episode of 2021 it's so crazy. I don't understand what happened to the year. Still, I know that there are so many of you who have been on the fence about joining Take A Break and doing this work with me. Still, the reality is there is nothing like taking what I teach on the podcast and putting it into action and really learning how to use the think, feel, and act cycle; it will change everything. Because you have to put it into action for your unique life, your unique experience, your unique relationship with alcohol, because the truth is, every person's habit and every person's relationship with alcohol it really does look different. There's never a one-size generic approach. You have to understand why you have the relationship you do so that you can start to change it. So, if you're ready to stop punishing yourself, and you should be, then head on over to rachelhart.com/January. You can reserve your spot in our January challenge.

So, we start with a 30-day break from drinking where we're really going to free up space in your mind and body so that you can really start to understand for the first time for many people that relationship that you've developed with alcohol and really start mastering the tools of habit change. And then, from thereafter the 30 days, you can stay as little or as long as you'd like working with my team of coaches to really build the skill that you need for lasting permanent change. Whether your change looks like drinking less, extending your break, or exploring an alcohol-free life, it's totally up to you, and we will be there to help you.

Alright, that's it for today. I will see you in the new year.

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.

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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.