

Ep #5: How to Handle Questions about Not Drinking



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Rachel Hart

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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. Welcome back. Welcome to the podcast. We are talking about how to handle questions about not drinking from other people. I love this topic and I love talking about this with my clients because I will tell you this was such a big issue for me and it held me back from changing for so long because I was so caught up in what people would think and I was so worried about how to answer these questions.

On the previous episodes, I have talked to you a lot about why we drink to unwind, why we drink to feel more confident, a different approach to how to even think about your struggle around drinking or challenges to changing how you drink and these were all things that I was really kind of excited to practice on my own. I was excited to practice the skills of learning how to unwind without a glass in my hand. I was excited to practice the skill of learning how to feel more confident without a buzz. I mean I was at times daunted by it, but I was excited by trying it out. Now, handling questions from other people, I did not feel excited about. It felt so personal because it was really dealing with other people's opinion of my decision to take a break and I will tell you that it really sent me in a tizzy and this was an area that I just found, I found it really challenging to make headway.

I have talked about this before on the podcast and if you have read my book "Why Can't I Drink Like Everyone Else" you will know that the very first time that I took a break from drinking, I was actually only 22 years old. I was a couple of weeks after my 22nd birthday and I got to a point where I was really, I was sick of the hangovers, I was sick of waking up and feeling embarrassed about what I had done the night before or not fully remembering everything and I really decided that alcohol kind of felt like a crutch in my life. It felt like something that I needed to feel confident and feel at ease and I wanted to find out what life would be like without it.

So I decided that I was just going to stop for a while. I decided I was going to take a break and the most challenging part at first, the most challenging part actually wasn't not drinking, it was dealing with other people. I found

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this so difficult and you might be able to relate to this because I know that other people are in the same boat when it comes to how I handle my friends, what I tell other people. When I first started doing this, I really concocted a lot of stories.

Now, I was living in New York City at the time and so being the designated driver was not really a thing because nobody was driving. You were taking the subway or you were taking a taxi, so I didn't have that as an excuse, so I tried all sorts of other excuses. I would talk about you know that I needed to wake up early or that I had actually gone out the night before and so I was taking tonight off, that wasn't true. I would talk about how I was trying to lose weight and so I didn't want to have the empty calories or I would tell people that I wasn't feeling well, you know, I had a headache or my stomach was upset or once I even tried to tell people that I was on antibiotics and so I couldn't mix medication with alcohol and I will tell you these stories, my excuses rarely worked.

They rarely worked. They rarely kept people at bay. I found that people always seem to have a comeback. They always were able to tell me you know they had to wake up really early in the morning too, but they were still drinking or they could give me a recommendation on a really low-calorie option if I was watching my waistline or you know what they mixed antibiotics and alcohol last weekend and it was perfectly fine and I had nothing to worry about and when my excuses didn't work, I started feeling like the solution was to not go out, kind of hide myself and to withdraw and that wasn't sustainable at all.

I wanted to see my friends. I wanted to go out. I was new to New York City and I wanted to explore. I wanted to go to parties and hangout with co-workers after work and not have it be a big deal and I felt like I was really torn between having decided at 22 that it was time for me to take a break and also feeling like I don't want to deal with this. I don't want to deal with people's questions. I hate feeling like I am being cross-examined every time I tell people I am not drinking tonight and I felt stuck. It was so frustrating.

It is funny too because it really did feel like for me that fielding people's questions about why I wasn't drinking was actually harder than not drinking itself because the not drinking part I think I felt like, well, I can usually kind of mask it or hide it and you know, I of course feel more comfortable when I

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am drinking, I feel more at ease, I feel more confident but it was dealing with other people's opinions and other people's reactions that I found so difficult.

The thing that I kept coming back to is why is this so hard, why is this so challenging and so many other people I work with are in the same position. They just want to know, can you just tell me the perfect thing to say, the perfect answer, the perfect comeback when they ask me the fifth question about why I am not drinking tonight. Can you just tell me the perfect thing to say?

Here's a thing. The reason why it's so hard is because we think that other people and their reactions are what is causing us to feel bad. We think that when they react negatively, when they are not supportive and they want us to make an exception, when they are asking us to explain ourselves, we think that that is what is causing us to feel bad and it's just not the case. I have talked about this before. I talk about it in my book, but it really all boils down to something called the think-feel-act cycle and it's the cycle that explains why we feel the way we do and why we do the things we do and what it says is that before we ever have a feeling, there is always a thought.

It's our thoughts that are producing our emotions and that is really what you need to pay attention to, but of course this is not what we were taught. We are taught that it is other people, then how other people are treating us or responding to us or reacting to us that's what causes our negative feelings.

So the question is, okay so what's the difference from me at 22 when I took that first break and that break lasted for a year and interestingly enough, one of the reasons why I started drinking again is that I really was just sick of answering people's questions. I didn't want it to be an issue anymore. I didn't want to have to explain myself and oftentimes I felt like I didn't even know how to explain myself and because of that that's part of the reason why I started drinking again a year later when I was 23.

So, I don't drink anymore now and you know more than a decade has passed and so the question is really what's the difference between me at 22 and me 15 years later because things have changed so much, right, and the difference is that my thinking, my thoughts about people's reaction, that's really what has changed.

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Now I know it can sound like what I am saying is, “Oh, just don’t care.” Don’t care what people think, it’s your decision, it doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks. It’s really not what I am saying here. I think that that’s an easy misconception and when people would tell me not to care about what other people thought, I found that kind of really frustrating. What I am saying is pay attention to how your thoughts create your feelings, pay attention to what your thinking is around this issue, pay attention to all the negative thoughts that come up for you when someone doesn’t respond in a positive way.

I didn’t know back then that my thoughts created my feelings. I didn’t know that people’s reactions didn’t determine how I felt and so the idea of, “Oh, I am just not supposed to care,” it seemed really impossible and unrealistic, but here’s the thing. The alternative is to try to control everyone’s opinion of your decision not to drink or your decision to take a break and to only interact with people who support you and there’s a problem with that. It’s impossible; it’s impossible to control everyone’s opinion. It’s impossible to ensure that you only ever interact with people who think not drinking is a great idea and so then you have to ask yourself where do I have control, what can I control and what you can control are how you think about your decision. What sort of thoughts you have around the choice to take a break and that’s what I wasn’t paying attention to before. I wasn’t paying attention to the thoughts that I had.

I had a thought that, yes, I wanted to take a break at 22, yes, I felt like this was the right thing for me to do, but I also had a lot of negative thinking attached to it. I also had a lot of thoughts about how it might mean that something was wrong with me, that I wouldn’t fit in, that I never would really have fun again, that I would be missing out. I had a lot of negative thoughts attached to it even though it was something that I wanted to do.

So, here’s what I will promise. If you decide that you want to take a break from drinking, you are going to encounter three types of people. You are going to encounter people first that genuinely do not care and do not notice and seemed unimaginable to me at the time that those people were out there but I can assure you there are. There are people who will just not care and not notice.

Second, you will encounter people in your life who think it’s a really good idea and they will be totally onboard with your decision and they might even

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be proud of you. They might even be curious and they might even want to know more but in a really curious way. They might even be interested in taking a break as well. You will encounter those people who think that your decision to take a break is a great idea.

But you will also encounter a third group of people and these people will tell you that it's really not a good idea and they will tell you. Some people will tell you that you are not as much fun as you used to be. They will ask you to make exceptions because it's their birthday or it's a party or you are out to dinner together and if you are not drinking, well then they can't drink because there can't only be one person drinking at a table, I have definitely heard that before. They will want to know exactly how long you plan to keep this up for.

How long are you going to do this? When you are going to make up your mind? When you are going to go back to drinking again? You will encounter people like this but you will also encounter people from the first two categories, but here's what I will tell you. I guarantee that your focus will be squarely on the third group of people, the people who are not so supportive and you will become fixated on them. You may want these people to shut up, you may think that it would just be so much easier if they kept their opinions to themselves, you may feel like they are constantly cross-examining you and wish that they just didn't ask you any questions about it.

Now here is how I know that my feelings are not created by any of these different groups of people because all three groups of people were there when I took a break from drinking for the very first time when I was 22. They were all part of my life. There were people who didn't notice; there were people who thought it was a great idea, and there were people who thought it was a terrible idea, and there are people still in my life at the age of 36 who fit into all three categories. There are people who do not care, there are people who think it's a really great idea and there are people who genuinely think that I am not as much fun and think like, "Why would you ever want to do that?", "Why would you ever want to stop drinking?", "That does not sound very interesting, nor does devoting your entire life to working on this issue and helping other people who also want to take a break, why would you do that."

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So these people are still in my life, but I will tell you I feel completely different about it and the reason why I feel completely different is because the only thing that really matters at the end of the day is not how people react, but what you make someone's reaction mean about you and back when I was 22, I was making it mean a lot of really negative stuff. I was making it mean something is wrong with me, that I have a problem, that I am different, that I am no fun, that I am a buzz kill, that I will never fit in.

I had all this negative thinking about it, but instead of focusing on what I was making their reactions mean about me, instead of focusing there, I put all my energy into thinking that everyone should really be onboard with this decision, that the people who weren't onboard were really doing something wrong and they shouldn't react that way and they should be more supportive. That's where I put all my energy. But it is completely unrealistic to want the entire world to support a decision you make and the truth is that there are lots of areas in our life where we have beliefs and decisions where we really don't care if someone is onboard with us because we believe so strongly in it.

For example, if someone were to say to me the fact that I think that you are a really vocal supporter of women's rights, I think it's kind of stupid would not matter. I would not then start questioning my decision to be a vocal supporter of women's rights. So just wouldn't even, that wouldn't even cross my mind, right, because I don't have any doubts about it. I don't second guess this decision to believe in gender equality. It doesn't even cross my mind and there are parts of your life where you also can think of areas where someone could question your decision or question a position and you wouldn't even think twice, it wouldn't even bother you. In fact you would think that something was weird about them, but we don't do this often around this issue. We don't do this around talking to other people about our decision not to drink and I think it's because it really points to something deeper going on and for me what that deeper piece was was the fact that I had doubts, I had doubts about this decision.

I didn't know if taking the break was a right decision. I didn't know if taking a break was a right decision for me. I didn't know if it meant something about me. I didn't know if I could see it through. I didn't know if I would never drink again. I didn't know if I was going to go back to drinking tomorrow or on Saturday. I didn't know if it meant that I would never be fun

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and I would always be missing out. I was really worried. I had a lot of doubts even though it was something that I wanted to do.

It took me a long time to realize that wanting everyone to be a 100% onboard was really my way of hiding from my doubts. It was my way of not having to address these doubts, not having to face them. I worried. I didn't know if I wouldn't be fun anymore. I didn't know if I would always be on the outside looking in. I didn't know if I would be missing out for the rest of my life or if it will be impossible to date or impossible to make friends. I didn't know if I would never be able to toast with a glass of champagne at a wedding or a New Year's like a normal person. I had all these doubts and questions and when people would want me to make an exception or they had asked me how long I was doing it for, they would tell me that I wasn't fun, it would bring up all these doubts. All these doubts would come to the surface.

What I didn't realize at the time and it took me a while to really understand this that the people who were questioning me, the people who weren't onboard, the people who weren't supportive, the people who gave me a hard time were actually so useful. They were so useful because my options were to kind of dance around the issue or tiptoe around it, to hedge about it or to stay home or whether expect that everyone should be onboard with me and everyone should agree with me and everyone should support me. That option of everyone supporting me wasn't great, wasn't really working and I didn't like all the hedging. I didn't like staying home, I didn't like dancing around the issue.

So, the third option was to use these people, the people who are questioning you who are totally supportive who want to know how long this is going to last, who tell you that you are not as much fun anymore to use these people to see all your own thinking about this issue because their reaction will bring up all your thoughts about what the decision to take a break means. What it means about you, what it means about your life, what it means about your future and most importantly what it means about all your doubts.

So, when someone pesters you to make an exception just this once or tells you that you are no fun since you stopped drinking or says that you are ruining dinner because they don't want to drink alone, you have the perfect opportunity to notice your own negative thoughts about what it means to

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take a break and here's the thing, if you don't start working on those negative thoughts, if you don't start trying to address those, if you don't start trying to counter those, those negative thoughts will always plague you. They will always plague you. They will kind of gnaw at the back of your mind, right? They will be there gnawing at you unless you do the work to clean them up.

When you realize that your feelings about taking a break and how you feel aren't created by someone's reaction but what you think their reaction means about you, you are in the absolute best place because that is the moment where you realize there is choice. You don't have to control everyone around you. You don't have to get everyone onboard. You just have to start using your ability to choose what you want to think and to pay attention to what you are thinking.

You can choose how you want to feel about this decision. You can also realize that you don't need support from other people. What you need, what you truly need is support from yourself and understanding what is creating your feelings, understanding that it is not people's reactions to your decision, but what you are making them mean, understanding how people's reactions bring up all your negative thoughts about this decision, that is the very best freedom, because here's the thing, if you clean all that up in the future, when someone supports your decision and thinks it's a great idea, that's great. It's kind of like icing on the cake, right? You don't need it, but it's nice to have it but when someone doesn't, when someone kind of wrinkles their nose at the idea that you don't drink, it won't face you because you have cleaned up all your negative thinking and that really is, if you are taking away one thing from today's episode, it really is what are you making someone's reaction mean about you.

Use these people, use the negative reactions to look at your own thinking because even if someone isn't reacting negatively to you right this second, you still carry around with you all your negative thinking, all your doubts and that has got to be cleaned up. That has got to be contested. That has got to be where you spend your energy. That's where all your work is.

So, I hope you enjoyed today's episode. I hope you also realized that it's not about having the perfect answer. It's not about making sure that everyone is onboard. It's about really understanding your own thoughts about what it means to take a break, what it means about you, what it

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means about your life, what it means about your future and using the people in your life who maybe don't have the most supportive reactions, using them to help you get really clear on your thinking.

They are the best people to have around, I promise. I did not think this for a long time but now I do and I see this by the way with so many different parts of my life, not just the decision around taking a break to drink but any decision where someone is not supporting me, it's really useful, it's really useful to be able to use their reaction to bring up all my thinking and take a look at it.

Okay, so I would love to hear from you about what you thought of today's episode. I know this is a question that so many of you out there struggle with. People talk to me a lot about really, can I just get that perfect answer, so I would love to hear from you. I always love hearing from my listeners. You can feel free to email me if you have questions, if you have ideas or topics that you would like me to cover in future episodes. Send me an email at podcast@rachelhart.com and if you found today's episode useful and you liked what you heard, I would really appreciate if you would rate me on iTunes and leave some feedback. That's all for this week. Thanks for listening.

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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