

Ep #9: Using Alcohol as a Crutch



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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.

Hey everybody. Welcome back. How are you doing? It is very early in San Francisco as I am recording this and we've just had daylight savings and so, it's really dark out and it makes me kind of sad because I'm really a morning person, really love the mornings and I like having sunshine in the morning, so it's dark. I'll get over it. Alright, today, what are we talking about? We're talking about a concept that I go over quite a bit in my book, "Why Can't I Drink Like Everyone Else?" It's a concept that I started thinking about pretty early on in my journey to figure out my drinking and the concept is using alcohol as a crutch. Now, before we go any further, a lot of times people don't like this language. They bristle a little bit at the idea that they could possibly be using alcohol as a crutch. So, if that is you, stay with me, hang in there. I want to talk to you about not only why that can happen and how easy it is to happen but also explain why you might not like that language and why I think it can be useful.

So, the first time that I stopped drinking I was a couple weeks after my twenty second birthday. It was a first of many times for me and back then I was a very avid journal writer. I loved my journal. I carried it with me. I wrote in it all the time and actually some of my close friends from my very first job after college who I'm still really close with, they tease me because when I first started working in that job, I was not very outgoing, I did not immediately reach out and try to make friends to people. I was really into my journal. You know, I talk about this a lot. I had a lot of anxiety around meeting people and that extended to work situations as well and so they saw me as the girl who during her lunch break would sit and write in her journal and not talk to anyone. So, I finally got over that. I finally did talk to people and make friends but I was writing in that journal all the time. I also had a very long subway commute back then when I was living in New York City, so I worked all the way at the bottom of Manhattan and I lived all the way at the very top in Washington Heights. So, I would write in that journal the entire hour long subway ride on a train.

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Anyway, it was in those kind of early days of trying to take a break and figure out what was going on, that I wrote for the first time in my journal and I still have it. It's fascinating to go back and look and see where I was back then but I wrote about alcohol being a crutch and not knowing why it was a crutch for me or how it had come to pass that I felt like I needed it as a crutch but identified pretty early on that I relied on it in a way that I didn't like and so, I mention that this language often makes people bristle that you know you probably don't like to think that you use anything outside of you as a crutch much less alcohol, and I think that's because so many of us, myself included for a long time, really do not like the idea of thinking about that we need help, that we need support, that we need assistance, that we need anything to lean on or to aid us or to help us out. I think that that is because we don't want to ever believe that we're weak in any way and that is what the language of a crutch suggests.

Now, I'll tell you the same time that for a lot of my clients who initially really don't like this language and resist it, they will at some point usually admit during a session that it actually really resonates. So, they don't like it. They don't want to acknowledge it but there's a little piece of them that feels like it might be true and that's because they will often tell themselves that a situation will be so much easier, they'd feel so much more comfortable if they could have a drink and that without it, they feel awkward and they feel uncomfortable or they feel like they're missing out, they feel like they are unable to relax, and I always work with people to help them understand what are the situations that alcohol helps you, what are the situations in which it makes you feel more comfortable.

Does it make you less uptight, so you become more social and more outgoing? Does it help take the edge off after a long day at work or a long day of being a parent? Does it help you forget about what's bothering you or stressing you out or what's kind of niggling in the back of your mind that you don't really want to think about? Does it help you sleep or does it help you stay awake? I think that that's always really interesting is that I work with people who are on both sides of that spectrum. Does it make you feel more confident and more attractive? Does it help you meet people, especially people that you might be romantically interested in? Does it give you permission to let loose and be silly and be a little crazy? I know this was a big one for me. I felt like especially because I was very rigid in a lot of aspects of my life that getting drunk was my permission to be a little crazy and I liked having that outlet.

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Does it make you feel less alone or just less bored by what you're doing at the end of the day or what you're doing on the weekend? Does it help you have difficult conversations with your partner or family members or does it just even help to be around them? A lot of people will talk to me about how the holiday or a family get together would be, they think, unbearable if they didn't have alcohol to kind of smooth the rough edges. Or does it help you be intimate? Does it help you be vulnerable? So, there's all of these different ways that alcohol can help you. It can help you make you feel more comfortable and many more ways than what I've just listed now.

And most of the people that I work with do not want to focus on that. They don't want to focus on the benefits or the positives even if they want to change or cut back, they don't want to look there. In fact, when they want to change or cut back, they think that the most important thing is to focus on the negatives. They are sick of the hangovers, they're sick of their regrets, they're sick of feeling unhealthy, and they want to just remind themselves of all these negative pieces of the puzzle. And that's what I did for a long time. I was very, very good at writing really long lists of everything that I regretted or every way that I felt terrible or ever thing that I was embarrassed about and I thought, "OK if I can just write this all down while I'm in the moment of feeling terrible about my drinking, if I can just write myself down and just remind myself over and over again about all these negatives that should be the thing that will help me, but here's the thing."

I did that for a very long time and it didn't work. Didn't work, and for a very long time, I wanted to ignore that there were a lot of benefits, a lot of positives for me when it came to drinking. For starters, I was a terrible self-critic, just terrible. I think a lot of you can recognize that in yourselves. And for a very long time, I didn't even understand that I was being overly critical of myself. I didn't get that. I thought that when I was listing what was wrong with me and what I needed to improve and what I was unhappy with, I was just stating the truth.

I didn't see that as being critical. I saw that as being factual. And that was one piece that alcohol really helped with because it was one of the times when I was drinking that I was able to quiet this internal self-critic. Also, and I didn't feel so critical of myself. I didn't feel so judgmental of myself. Another reason - I really fell out of my element in social situations. I had no idea how to co-exist with the anxiety that I felt thinking back to that girl that was just sitting writing in her journal during breaks at her first job should

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give you a clue. I didn't know what to do with any of that anxiety. I felt totally out of my element and I just wanted the feeling to go away. And alcohol drinking really helped put me in ease in those situations. It really turned the volume down on the anxiety that I felt.

I was also fixated on doing everything perfectly. I talked about this a little bit with how much I enjoyed the fact that drinking was really one of the few places in my life where I gave myself permission to just be a little crazy and cut loose and be silly and ridiculous and do things that were out of character and that was really not the norm for me because I was so fixated on doing everything perfectly. I wanted to get gold stars for everything, and so I created all these impossible standards for myself in my life with achievement right with school, with education but also with my appearance. I created a lot of impossible standards about how I should look and trying to look perfect. And I had no idea how to give myself a break under the weight of so much pressure, so much pressure to do and look perfect and that's where drinking came in. It allowed me to step outside of that perfectionist box I had built for myself.

So, there were a lot of benefits for me when it came to drinking, benefits that I really didn't like to acknowledge but they were there. When I stopped drinking for the first time at twenty two, I had a zero plan to cope with my self-critic, my anxiety or my reliance on perfectionism. I had no idea what to do with these things and these were all things that drinking gave me a little relief from. These were all things that getting a buzz or getting drunk seemed to be the perfect remedy for. And so the whole time that I was trying to take a break, I felt like I was missing out because I really wanted to drink, I really wanted those benefits and I had no idea how to make headway on the issues that drinking was helping me with. I had no idea how to make headway on being a terrible self-critic or feeling a lot of anxiety or being a perfectionist, and I think that that is so common for so many of the people that I work with.

We get really fixated on this idea that it's just about how much we drink. It's just about cutting back. It's just about taking a break. It's just, it's like counting. We think it's a numbers game. It's not a numbers game. It can be a numbers game in the sense that, you know, for an entire year when I was twenty two, I didn't drink. So, it was a numbers game in that sense. It did keep me from hangovers. It did keep me from doing anything that I was embarrassed about. It did keep me from feeling regretful the next morning

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but it did not keep me from feeling like I was missing out and it did not help me at all dealing with any of the things that drinking was really helping me with.

We all have this fixation that all the cause of our problems is alcohol and drinking and that that's a problem and what I want is for you to start thinking about it in a different way and so that the cause of your problem or problems is not alcohol. It's that alcohol is helping you in some way that you don't really know yet how to help yourself in this way. It's making you more comfortable in certain situations. It's getting rid of something. It's benefiting you. The only problem is that no one has ever showed you an alternative means to get these things. No one's ever shown you an alternative means to feel less uptight or to be more social. Alternative means to take the edge off or to unwind or to help you forget about what's bothering you, to help you sleep, to help you stay awake, to help you feel more confident or attractive, to give you permission to let loose, to deal with loneliness or to deal with boredom, to help you have difficult conversations or to help you be intimate.

So, we unconsciously teach ourselves that alcohol can help us in all of these situations and then we find that for whatever reason we decide that we want to cut back or we want to take a break, maybe because we don't like the results that we're getting, we don't like how we feel the next day, we don't like what we do when we're drinking and we decide to take a break or we decide to cut back and all of a sudden, we are face to face with these things, these areas of our life that alcohol is helping us with and we have no idea what to do. Now, you have to remember that your brain is always seeking pleasure and avoiding pain and when I'm talking about pain, it's not just physical pain, right. It's not just hurting yourself physically or stubbing your toe. It could also be the discomfort from negative emotions. So when you feel lonely, when you feel shy, when you feel anxious or insecure or uptight or vulnerable or stressed, whatever it is, just plain uncomfortable emotionally, alcohol is that quick and easy fix to feel differently.

And if you turn to it over and over again to make a specific situation, like socializing or meeting people or getting home from work or a part of your life more bearable, basically any negative emotion that you don't like experiencing, your brain will learn that having a drink solves a problem and this will become especially tricky to shake if you don't have other means of solving these problems and that's what I mean when I talk about alcohol as

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a crutch because it's essentially solving a problem for us that we just don't yet know how to solve on our own. When I was twenty two and I was writing in my journal about alcohol feeling like a crutch, I only had a piece of the puzzle I understood that it felt like I needed alcohol in certain situations.

I understood that I was feeling like I relied on it a little bit too much or depended on it a little too much but I didn't understand the problem solving part. I didn't understand that I had to start learning new ways to solve these problems or also, I was always going to feel like I was missing out and not making headway. And the really challenging part is that I took a break at twenty two because I wanted to feel better, not worse and I think certainly, I really struggled with feeling worse for much of it because I just didn't know what to do with any of the discomfort that I had from my negative emotions I didn't know what to do with that anxiety and when I couldn't turn the volume down on it, I had to be without anxiety full force and that didn't feel good for me.

So, alcohol never eliminated these problems for me. It just temporarily diverted my attention from the discomfort that I felt and nothing was solved in the long run. In fact and this is the piece that I think is so important to understand - the longer I drink to deal with my insecurity, my perfectionism, my anxiety, the more these things took root. So, the more I saw alcohol as a way to solve these problems unconsciously, but the more I understood that there was a quick and easy fix, the more these issues, these discomforts took root and I didn't know what to do with them. Not only that but when drinking becomes that quick and easy fix to change how you feel and you start to use it on a regular basis, it is going to bring with it a second set of problems. It is going to bring with it first increased desire, more and more desire to drink because your brain doesn't care about the reward, it just cares that it's getting a reward, so there's that. There's that increased desire but then the second piece is also the repercussions of drinking too much.

So, you start to use alcohol unknowingly to feel a little bit better to get rid of any discomfort that you're having, to change how you feel and then it brings with it the second set of problems and on top of that, you start to feel like you need it. You start to feel like but what will happen when I have to go to this party and I'm the only one not drinking, what will happen when I come home from a long day of work and I just want to relax and I don't have any way to relax if I don't pour myself a glass of wine, but what will

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happen if I go home for the holidays, which are always difficult, and I don't have something to take the edge off what is going to be a difficult and challenging time, but what will happen if I'm still trying to meet people but I'm still looking to find a partner and it's so awkward and uncomfortable without a drink in my hand.

This is the cycle that so many people get caught in and understanding how alcohol can become a crutch and also that it means absolutely nothing about you. It does not mean that you are weak. It does not mean that something is wrong or defective. It just means that you unknowingly taught your brain that alcohol and having a drink can make you feel better in specific situations, in specific parts of your life or when specific negative emotions arise, and your brain has just learned that having a drink solves a problem, and you don't yet have another way of solving it. That is the most important piece when I start working with people that I have them pay attention to what are you learning when you turn to a drink, what are the benefits, what is a drink helping you solve in your life, what are the upsides. It's an area that so many of us don't want to look at often. We want to just focus on the negatives.

We want to focus on how it's not working but the more you practice this lesson of alcohol being a quick and easy fix, the more ingrained it will become and you have to look, you have to look at how it is helping you. You have to understand how you have started to feel like situations are just better when you have it. How you feel like you need it a little bit, how you can't imagine going to an event or having a conversation or having sex with someone for the first time without also having a little bit of a buzz. You have to understand what these upsides are if you want to start to pinpoint how you are going to find new and different ways to solve these problems.

Otherwise, when you take a break, the break will only be focused on counting how many drinks you're having or not having. The break will only be focused on quantity. It'll be totally focused on how much you are consuming. I don't want you to focus on how much. I want you to start looking at why and that is where you will get the insight that you need to start making headway and to tackle this in a very different way than you've probably ever done before.

OK, so just a recap - It's all about looking at the benefits of your drinking rather than the negatives to understand how alcohol can become a crutch

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and if you bristle at that language, I get it. A lot of people do but it's important to understand this and it's important to understand that if alcohol has become something that you rely on in certain situations or when certain emotions or certain discomfort appears, there is nothing wrong with that. That's actually the best information that you can have if you want to go about changing it but you need to look at that and you need to understand that question. Moving forward what you need are new ways to solve these problems and that's all about the work that I will talk about on this podcast, all about the work that I do with my clients. It's why this work is so much bigger than just about drinking. It really is.

OK, so that's it from dark San Francisco. I hope the sun will be coming out soon. Let me know what you think. I really love hearing from my listeners. You can always e-mail me at podcast at www.rachelhart.com, and to celebrate the launch of this show and to thank you all for listening. I'm going to be giving away ten copies of my e-book, *Why Can't I Drink Like Everyone Else?* All you have to do is leave a review on iTunes and then head on over to my website, www.rachelhart.com/iTunes and let me know the title of your review, and you'll be entered to win. Thanks everybody for listening. 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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