

Ep #10: How to Change Your Past and Free Yourself from Shame



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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.

Hi everybody. Welcome back. Welcome to episode 10.

I have been thinking about my podcast listeners a lot this week because I just wrapped up the final meeting from my book groups. So, for those of you who don't know, in December, I published a book called "*Why Can't I Drink Like Everyone Else*" that outlines all the tools that I use with my coaching clients. It talks about all the concepts, all the ideas that I have around why drinking can become a habit, why it can be tricky to change that habit, and how to move forward if you want to cut back or take a break. And the book group was amazing. I had 20 people together and we were all talking about the concepts, the chapters, what they were struggling with and really learning together as a group.

Now, one issue came up as part of that book group that I don't talk about in my book, but I wanted to do a podcast episode on because I think that it is something that so many people really struggle with. If you are thinking about changing your drinking or cutting back or taking a break, whatever it is, a lot of people will start that work. In fact, a lot of the people that I work with will begin that work and they will get stuck in one place and the place where they will get stuck is feeling that they are unable to forgive themselves for something that they did in their past when they were drunk. So, you might be able to relate to this and this issue is really close to my heart because I will tell you that this was a monumental struggle for me. It really was. Drinking let me cut loose, it let me be a little crazy, it gave me a respite from my be perfect, do-perfect mentality that I had in my day-to-day life, but sometimes I took things too far. Sometimes, I want to be a little bit too reckless, and I would wake up the next day, and I wasn't just dealing with a hangover, which was bad enough, but I was dealing with the embarrassment and shame of how I had acted or what I had done the night before. And when I first started doing this work myself, I started paying attention to my thoughts and my feelings and my urges, I felt so much more in control. I felt so much more in control around alcohol, but I also just

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started to feel better. I was feeling happier. I was feeling more at ease, but there was one thing that I couldn't shake. I couldn't shake that little niggling in the back of my mind about some of the things that I had done that I thought I just couldn't forgive myself for.

So, the question I have for you is "can you relate to this?" Is there something in your past, something that you did when you were drinking that you also feel like you cannot shake the embarrassment or you just don't believe it is possible to forgive yourself for what you did? Maybe you even feel like you are in a different place right now, you are not that same person, but you can't get rid of the ghosts of your past. It maybe something that you said or how you acted, who you slept with, getting into a fight, making a scene, whatever it is, I know that for people, myself included, who wanted to change how they drink and change this habit, this can be such a sticking point. So, that's what today's show is all about. It is how to change your past and I know that this is something that you think is impossible, but I am going to show you how to do it.

So, here's what most people say when they are confronted with the idea that they can change how they think about their past or think differently about something that they believe causes them a lot of shame or embarrassment or regret. The first thing that you might say to yourself is well, what I did was inexcusable or I heard people and I can't take that back. So, the only way to feel better is to go back in time and undo what I did and that's impossible. So, here I am, I am just stuck. I am stuck because my actions were inexcusable. People might also say and you might think this, well, if I try to change how I think about what I did, I will be letting myself off the hook. Have you ever felt like that? I know that I have.

So if I try to change how I think, or my perception about what I did, then I will be somehow cutting myself slack that I don't deserve. And it is sort of like we tell ourselves that we have to pay penance for our actions, and that the shame and the guilt that we feel is payback for what we did. Or that if we feel bad enough, if we feel enough shame and enough guilt and enough regret, then we won't repeat our mistakes. But I want to pose this to you – has that worked? Has feeling shame and guilt and regret and embarrassment kept you in line?

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I really believed for a very long time that those should be things that would keep in line and then I didn't understand when I would repeat the same mistake or I would wake up the next day once again having done something that I regretted and I just thought, "well, I am not learning my lesson appropriately. I just don't have enough shame or enough guilt or enough embarrassment to really feel bad about what I am doing."

Now, here's the problem with these two responses. One is that you cannot go back and undo what you did. So, we can't build a time machine, we cannot step back in time and/or hit rewind and undo the past. So, getting caught in that framework of if only I could take it back, it's not going to do you much good.

You are not going to be able to change whatever happened in the past and what you will end up doing is just spin and you will spin around this idea of "if only I could, if only that hadn't happened, if only it was possible to." But it's not. So, that's the first problem.

The second is when you feel a lot of negative emotions it affects how you act. So, our actions are always generated by how we feel by our emotions and shame does not generate positive actions and this is a problem because if you want to change your drinking, if you want to take a break, if you want to start doing something differently or unwinding a habit that you have that you feel like it's no longer serving you, that is not going to be generated, those actions are not going to come from a place of shame.

I want you to think about this. When you feel the emotion of shame in your body and it is an intense emotion, when you feel that way, how do you act? I want you to really think about this and answer this for yourself.

When you feel that shame, when shame is coursing through your body, what do you do? And I will tell you that for me the answer was I hid or I tried to cover up how I felt and I bet that a lot of you can relate.

Shame keeps us in the dark. It keeps us from getting support or love. It keeps us from changing and now here's the thing. If you are already in a place where you use a drink to change how you feel, and let's admit it – so many of us do that because alcohol is such a quick and easy way to change how you feel – guess what? If you don't like the way you are feeling

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because you feel a lot of shame, you are probably going to end up drinking more and this is why this is such a negative cycle.

It is such a negative cycle because we really want to change. We really want to do things differently. We really want to act differently. We really want to feel like this habit is something that we have under control. And then, we think about some of the things that happened when we were drinking and we beat ourselves up. We create all the shame. And when we create all the shame, we end up hiding. We end up not reaching out, not asking for help, or support, or looking for answers. Or we tell ourselves, "I just can't take feeling this, this feels terrible, and I need to do something to feel differently." And for most people that means looking for something in their external environment to feel differently. And for a lot of you listening, that means pouring a glass and having something to drink. But you cannot stop your desire to drink. You cannot change this habit. You cannot take a break from alcohol from a place of shame. It will not be a position that lasts. It will not be a place that will give you long lasting results. It might get you started, it might get you taking a week off, or a month off, right? I am not saying that it isn't possible to act differently, but it's not going to be motivating in the long run, because shame does not fuel change, because negative emotions do not fuel positive actions. Shame keeps you stuck.

So, here's what I would do when I would feel shame. First, as I mentioned, I would hide. I would want to pull the covers over my head and pretend whatever happened didn't happen. So, I would go into denial or I would make excuses or I would tell myself, "you know, it doesn't matter, it's not a big deal." Anything that I kind of hide from what happened. I would also often tell myself that something was wrong with me; and you can imagine how that felt if you have ever done the same thing.

If you have done something and then told yourself that the reason you did it was because something is wrong with you. A good person wouldn't have done what you did. You can imagine how that just perpetuates shame. I also had another strategy which some of you might be familiar with. I would try to make up for whatever I did by running around being perfect. So, inside I would think, yeah, okay, I am a screw up, I really messed up, there is something wrong with me, but look at all this other stuff that I am great at. Look at all these things that I have achieved. Look at how I do all these other things perfectly.

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I thought that I could perfect my way out of it or achieve my way out of it. If I just collected enough gold stars, if I just did enough things right, maybe that would tip the scale a little bit. And you can imagine how exhausting that tactic is. And I am sure that many of you listening use that and then as we talked about I would distract myself with something else. And often that distraction would be ending my work day and deciding to go to a bar with friends or stopping home on my way after work and getting a bottle of wine – anything that would help me forget about how I was feeling.

Now, here's the thing. I know that you think that shame has everything to do and is created by what happened in your past that you believe is inexcusable and you cannot forgive yourself for. But what I want to offer to you is that shame is not created by what you did or what you said or the scene you made or the person you slept with or whatever you think is unforgivable. Shame is only ever created by what is going on in your mind. This is the most important thing to understand. Your past – no matter what is in your past – does not create how you feel about it today in this very moment. If you feel ashamed or guilty or regretful about something that happened in your past, it's because you are having a thought right now that is producing the emotions of shame or guilt or regret.

Now, I know that that is a big shift in how lot of us think, but it is so true. No matter what happened your past is not that powerful. Whatever you did is not that powerful to make you feel a certain way today. How you are feeling right now about something you did in your past and something you are telling yourself I can't forgive myself for, has everything to do with how you are thinking about that thing that happened and this alone. This concept alone that your past does not cause how you feel but your thoughts about your past cause how you feel is mind-blowing for people, because if you want to change how you feel about your past, you don't have to step into a time machine. You don't have to cover up how you are feeling. You don't have to keep generating negative feelings to hope that you will learn your lesson. If you want to change how you feel about your past what you have to do is first change how you are thinking about your past.

So, what I want to run through with you today are some questions that you can start asking yourself to figure out how can I start thinking about my past differently. This is going to be really challenging work; and so I would encourage you to not just try to do this work in your head, but you might

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want to later get a notebook, write these questions and your answers down so you can really dig into it. Because for many people, what they will say is it's impossible to change how I think about my past, and it's not. I promise that it's not. I have done it myself. I help people do this all the time and you can do it too, but it will be challenging work, especially if you believe what you have done is unforgivable and inexcusable and never should have happened and you cannot live it down. Okay, so there are five questions that we are going to go through:

The first one I want you to ask yourself is, "what is the main thought that you have about the worst thing that you have ever done while drunk?"

Now, pay attention to this because I am not asking you about the worst thing you have ever done while drunk. I am asking you what is the main thought that you have about it. So, it might be something like, "I wish this hadn't happened. This is unforgivable. I am a bad person. I am a screw up. I am never going to be able to live this down. I hurt people." Whatever it is, write down what is the main thought that you have about the worst thing you have ever done while you were drinking.

The next question I want you to answer is this: "What feeling does that thought create for you?"

Now, again, this is a shift in how a lot of us are used to thinking about it. We think that our past and what we did creates how we feel. But I want you to take a look at the thought that you wrote down and ask yourself, "when I think that thought, I wish it hadn't happened, this is unforgivable, I am a bad person," whatever it is, when you think that thought, what feeling is created for you? It could be any range of feelings. It could be shame or embarrassment or guilt, rejection, hopelessness, anger, whatever it is. I want you to write down that feeling.

Question number three. I want you to ask yourself whatever the feeling is you identified, "is this feeling useful?"

Now, do not get caught in saying, okay, yeah, but I deserve it, I deserve to feel this way. What I want you to ask yourself is, is the feeling useful? Is it helping you take action to change or to get closer to what you want in life or to become the person you want to be or to achieve your goals or to take

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action on your drinking, is this feeling useful or is it doing the opposite? What do you do when you feel ashamed or embarrassed or guilty or rejected or hopeless or angry? What do you do? What are your actions or inactions? Do you try to hide? Are you in denial? Do you make excuses? What is it? So, ask yourself, “is this feeling useful?” Is it getting you closer to what you want and the actions that you want to take?

Question number four, “if you could feel any way you wanted to about what happened, how would you feel?”

Now, again, this is challenging work. And when I do this work with a lot of people, they will say, “well it’s impossible to feel any other way. It is impossible to feel anything other than shame or regret.” But I want you to try to open your mind. I want you to consider that another feeling could potentially be possible and ask yourself, “how would you want to feel about what happened?” Now, a lot of people will get stumped here. You might start thinking, “I don’t know. I can’t come up with another answer, I cannot figure out another possible way to feel about this situation.” And so if you are stuck right now, one thing that you can do is ask yourself, “what if you and your best friend traded places and she had your past? She had done the thing that you did that you think is inexcusable, unforgivable, unredeemable. If the two of you traded places and she had your past, what would you think? What would you hope that she could feel about the situation?”

So, try to step into those shoes. Try to step into the place where you are not just in the position of this is something I did and I can’t think or feel any differently about it. Try to view that that happened from the perspective of someone else. Think about that best friend of yours. If she had done the thing that you think is the very worst thing you ever did while drinking, what would you tell her? What would you hope that she could feel? Would it be feelings of forgiveness or acceptance, worthiness, love, what would it be? What would you want this friend of yours to feel? So, think about that. Think about the feeling that you would want her to have and knowing that our feelings and our emotions are always created by what we are thinking.

The last question, question five, is really focused on “can you start to come up with some thoughts that will stop punishing you for something that happened in your past, stop generating shame or embarrassment or guilt

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or whatever the negative emotion is and start to generate some different emotions? Maybe acceptance or forgiveness or peace or understanding, whatever it is what can you start thinking that would generate something different. Now?" I want you go back and remember in question one what you wrote down was the main thought about something that you did while you were drunk that is causing you to feel the negative emotion that you have right now. So, now we are trying to do is brainstorm some different thoughts that you can try testing out. I want you to try to brainstorm at least five different thoughts about this thing that happened in your past and test them out. Thoughts that you think might feel slightly better and also feel believable.

So, you are going to have to brainstorm different thoughts. You are going to have to say them out loud, see how they feel, see if they are at all believable to you. Do they produce a better feeling emotion? And keep searching until you find one that you can believe.

Now, I have to tell you, this is not an exercise where you go from feeling shame to contentment overnight. You really need to think about this as when you are starting to change how you feel about your past. It is a gradual process. And I will tell you that for me, I really had to try out a lot of different thoughts. The feelings of shame that I had because of the thoughts that I was thinking about things that I had done when I was drinking, they were pretty entrenched and they didn't want to release their grip or shake free with ease.

It was a process that I had to work on. But I will tell you that there are thoughts out there that will help you to start changing how you feel about your past and you may be surprised where you encounter them. You might encounter them in books or other podcasts. You might encounter them in movies or articles, be on the lookout because I will tell you one of the very best thoughts that I ever encountered was actually from a book. I read it, and I remember thinking, "oh, this is a different way than I can start to think about my past." And I took it and I reframed it and reworked it, so it felt a little bit more true to me, true to the situation that I was in. But for so long, I carried this thought with me and practiced thinking this thought, and the thought is, "you have not always been the best version of yourself, but that makes you like everyone else." And I can't tell you how much freedom that thought gave me because I was walking around for so long feeling like

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there were things in my past that I could not shake. That I was always going to feel terrible about, that I was always going to have really negative feelings about because I believed that what created how I felt was the things that I had done.

I wasn't attuned to the fact yet that what created how I felt was actually the way I was thinking about it. And what I was saying to myself was, "you are a terrible person for having done these things." And so encountering this thought and making it my own, "you have not always been the best version of yourself, but that makes you just like everyone else," it was monumental in how it helped me to start to see that I could potentially feel differently about things that happened when I was drinking and things that happened in my past. And I will tell you it's a process. I didn't just stay with that thought, I kept working on it. I kept advancing or trying out better feeling thoughts. And today, my past completely does not create how I feel. It does not create shame or guilt or embarrassment for me because it never did. What created shame and guilt and embarrassment was the way I thought about it, and through this coaching work, I have learned how to change my thinking and ultimately change my past.

Alright, so, just as a recap for today, your past cannot cause you shame. Only your thoughts about your past will cause a feeling and when you feel shame or any negative emotion, that is not going to serve you if you want to change. In fact, it's probably going to hurt you and keep you stuck. Which is why it is in your best interest to start thinking differently about your past and you can change your past by changing what you think about it, changing what you think it means about you, changing the narrative. And I will tell you, that moving to this place and finding a new perspective, a new way to think about it is something that is going to be some of the most profound work that you can do because so many of the people that I worked with, they really want to change their drinking. They really want to take a break. They really want to get a hold of this habit. And they are carrying their past as like heavy baggage. You know, it's like something that they are dragging behind them and is holding them down, and they tell themselves, "no, this is a good thing, I need to remember that this was terrible so that I will never do it again." But it just holds them back. So that's why I want you to go through these questions today and really consider if you can start looking differently at your past as well. So, that's it from me.

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Thank you so much for listening. I have been hearing from so many of my podcast listeners, people with ideas and questions and I love hearing from you. So, if you want to be in touch, you can always shoot me an email at podcast at [rachelhart.com](mailto:podcast@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 and that's it for episode 10. 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.