

Ep #24: I'm No Fun without a Drink



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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 24.

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, happy 4th of July! I hope you have the day off, I hope you're out with friends and family, maybe you're at a picnic or a barbeque, maybe you're getting ready to watch fireworks later tonight. But whatever it is, I hope you're having a great time, and since today is all about celebration, I thought that we would spend some time talking about a topic that comes up all the time with my clients, and it came up a lot for me when I first started to try to unwind the habit of drinking, and that is the topic of having fun.

I actually have so much to say about this, I was working on today's episode and I realized that it was too much to cover in one episode. So I'm actually breaking this out into a little mini-series, and next week I'll be talking about fun as well, so stay tuned for part two next week. But I wanted to really talk to you guys about this, because I know a lot of you out there are struggling with this, and I know a lot of you out there feel like taking a break from drinking or changing your drinking means that you're going to stop having fun.

So I hear a lot of versions of these two sentiments. The first is "I'm no fun when I don't drink" or "This event will be unbearable if there isn't booze or if I'm not drinking", right? So I'm sure that most of you listening have thought at some point or another, some iteration of one or both of those thoughts, and I will tell you, these were thoughts that were just front and center for me as well. I thought especially the first one, "I'm no fun when I don't drink" - I thought that all the time, and also thinking about, "God, do I really have to go to this event and drink a seltzer? Am I really going to go to this event,

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there's not even going to be booze there, like oh god, that's going to be terrible", and those thoughts, they kept me stuck for a really long time and I know that they're keeping some of you stuck right now who are listening. Because after all, really who wants a life without fun? Nobody does. So I really want to go into both of these thoughts on today's episode so you can really start to understand them and see how they apply in your life.

But first, I want to start with talking about what is fun? What does fun mean? Fun is really anything that we find amusing or enjoyable or entertaining, right? So maybe you think of other people, or parties, or hobbies, or outings or activities as things that are fun. But the question really is okay, if those things are fun, what makes them fun? What makes a person or a party or a hobby or an outing or an activity amusing or enjoyable or entertaining? And that's where most of us don't spend a lot of time thinking. We don't think a lot about this piece. What makes something fun?

And most of you will say the thing itself is what makes it fun. So and so is a really fun person, or that party was fun in and of itself, or going hiking or going swimming or watching a baseball game, whatever it is, those activities are fun, that's what makes it fun. But now, remember the think-feel-act cycle. Remember what creates your emotions. What makes you happy? What makes you feel excited or amused or engaged? What makes you have these feelings? Your thoughts. That's how the cycle works. But that's now how most of us understand fun. We think that the thing or the activity itself is fun. We don't pay attention to our thinking.

I was thinking about how to explain this to you guys, and something that came to mind was the idea that one person's heaven is another person's hell. You know that expression? So you know, what I enjoy or find amusing or entertaining is not what you enjoy or find amusing or entertaining, because you and I, we don't share the same thoughts, and if we did then sure, we would both agree that the same thing is fun, but our thoughts are different and so our perception of what is and is not fun is also different.

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So as I was thinking about how to explain this to you guys, I was thinking about what I really like to do, and I like to do some kind of offbeat things. And one of them is that I really like visiting old cemeteries. I know if you were listening in last week, I talked about how much I love old stone houses and I realized today I'm talking about how much I like old cemeteries, so you might be noticing a theme in my life. I really like old things. But the truth is, I grew up in Connecticut, and down the street right from where I lived, there was an old cemetery and my friends and I used to play there, and I also remember in elementary school that we would go on trips to cemeteries and we would do gravestone rubbing. So you know, when you put that piece of paper over an old stone and you make a rubbing, and I don't know, maybe this is just something that happens when you grow up in New England, I have no idea.

But anyway, for me, cemeteries have never been a morbid or a depressing place or a place to avoid. To me, they've always been a place with a lot of history, and I really like the unusual carvings and the symbols and the unusual names and the little snippet of stories commemorating people that are no longer with us. I've always really liked that. But now here's the thing, this is why I chose to tell you this example, because most people do not think visiting cemeteries is fun. Most people think the exact opposite.

A lot of you listening are probably like, that's weird. I think going to cemeteries is depressing, right? You're probably not thinking, hey I have a free Saturday afternoon, I wonder if there's an old pioneer cemetery nearby where I am in California, and maybe I can check it out. But that's what I wonder sometimes. So you and I have different thoughts. I have thoughts that makes hanging out and exploring in a cemetery fun, and you might have thoughts that makes hanging out or exploring in a cemetery boring or depressing or morbid or weird, right?

So the thing that I find amusing or enjoyable or entertaining is not the same for you, and the reason you don't necessarily find it amusing or enjoyable or entertaining, the reason why you don't necessarily find it to be fun is because you and I are thinking different thoughts. So with that example in

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mind, let's go back to the original thought. So the thoughts, "I'm no fun when I don't drink" or "This event will be unbearable without booze".

I want you to really, really pay attention. Pay attention to what you are saying when you think to yourself, "I'm no fun when I don't drink" or "This event will be unbearable without booze". What you are saying is that the reason something is enjoyable is because of alcohol, and alcohol alone. The reason something is fun, the reason you will have a good time or a bad time is because of booze, right? But what makes something enjoyable is your thinking, that's how the think-feel-act cycle works.

Now, alcohol can make you appear to be more fun, and it can make an event seem to be fun, it can change our perception in a couple of different ways, and I want to explain that to you. The first, and we've talked about this before, drinking provides an influx of dopamine to your brain, and dopamine is the neurotransmitter that creates the feeling of enjoyment. So that's the first way that it can change your perception. The second is that the dopamine you get from drinking can dampen or dull or turn down the volume on a negative feeling that you're already having. So if you go into a situation and you're feeling anxious or nervous or awkward or insecure, whatever it is, suddenly you will feel less of these negative emotions with an influx of dopamine in your brain.

And then the third way - and we haven't really discussed this one as much on the podcast, but the third way that alcohol can change your perception of either yourself or an event is that alcohol depresses a part of your brain, the prefrontal cortex, where thought processing and consciousness is centered. So basically, it quiets your inner critic, and that is how you become less inhibited. It's quieting all the thoughts that you're having, the negative thoughts that you're having about yourself and the situation.

But whether or not you are truly fun and whether or not an event is truly fun actually has to do with your thoughts. You've just got so used to outsourcing fun to alcohol and relying on that influx of dopamine to change how you feel about yourself and about the situation that you're in that you don't bother doing any of the heavy lifting yourself and paying attention to

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what you're thinking. Most of us don't even realize that there is work that we could be doing. We get caught up in that, "I'm just no fun" and "This event just won't be any fun and we feel stuck". But there's so much here that you can change on your own if you learn how to stop outsourcing the perception of fun to alcohol and learn how to have actual fun using the think-feel-act cycle.

So let's look at what's really happening, I want to really go into these two thoughts. So we're really going to go into "I'm no fun if I'm not drinking", because I know that comes up for so many of you. It came up with me forever. I thought it for the longest time. I'm just no fun if I'm not drinking. And I had all this evidence for this. I had a lot of evidence. I would go to a party and I could not wait to get a drink in my hand. Everything leading up to the point at which my buzz kicked in was so unpleasant, and I'll tell you, it was much more than just the hour leading up to the party. I was often worried about the party, I was worried about going out way in the lead up.

So maybe days in advance I might be thinking like, who's going to be there, am I going to be awkward, am I going to feel anxious, I'd be kind of worried about it just on a low level in the day leading up to it, and then the day of, I would feel anxious getting ready, I would be anxious about how I looked, I would be anxious about what I was wearing, that I wasn't going to fit in or have any fun, and you can understand why I often started drinking before I even left the house, right? I mean, just the act of getting ready brought up all these negative thoughts for me, which created all these negative feelings. A lot of times I felt like, god, I can't wait to have a drink to get there. I should probably grab a beer from my fridge, or open up a bottle of wine so I can start to feel better immediately.

So I was feeling anxious in the lead up and then I was anxious on the way to the party, and anxious when I got there and anxious when I knocked on the door and walking up the steps. I was anxious arriving, and then I felt kind of awkward meeting people and awkward - those first couple minutes when you're trying to figure out who's there and do you know anybody and where are you supposed to go, and the person you thought was going to

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be there isn't really there. I had all these negative feelings and my brain was like, just find the bar. Just find the bar and then you'll be okay.

And when I would try to cut back or I would go through these periods of not drinking, the feeling of anxiety didn't seem to abate. I already felt anxious in the lead up to the party and now without a drink, I felt anxious for even longer. And so for my at least, if I wasn't drinking, if I told myself you're not going to drink tonight, you had a really crazy weekend last weekend, so this weekend you're going to be good - whatever I was telling myself. It was really interesting, I would notice that my smoking would really pick up because I was also - I really enjoyed smoking for a very long time. So I would feel anxious and suddenly I would have to excuse myself to go step outside or ask the host if I could go out on the fire escape and smoke and you know, something so that I could just temporarily remove myself from the situation and give myself a little bit of space not to be in that situation, because I was so sure that was what was making me feel terrible.

And so I felt very caught. I really did feel very caught by this thought, "I'm just no fun if I'm not drinking" because I had all this evidence that that was true. So what I wasn't considering and what you're probably not considering as well is really what makes you fun. We are fun, right, when we feel open or at ease or curious or adventurous or positive and silly, when we're not in our head, when we're not fixated on all of our shortcomings or our problems, we're not complaining, we're not too serious because we want to appear a certain way. We're usually fun when our focus is outside of ourselves, when you are engaging with the world around you.

Most of us are not that much fun when we are stuck in our own heads and our focus is squarely on ourselves, and usually how we compare to other people around us, and the problem is that you have gotten so used to using alcohol as the primary way to switch your focus, we use alcohol to quiet our inner critic and to switch our focus from being stuck on ourselves and stop obsessing on the negative and alcohol because of the effect it has on our prefrontal cortex, we're able to then kind of stop obsessing on all of that and actually turn our focus to the external world.

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But most of us have no idea how to do this on our own because we don't even recognize to begin with the role of our thoughts in creating how we feel, and you have to recognize this first before you can start to really change your drinking. Here's the thing, and you know what, I didn't like hearing this news and you may not like hearing this news either, but the truth is if you think you aren't fun when you don't drink, you're probably right. You probably aren't that great to be around. I wasn't. I really wasn't. I had so much negative thinking going on in there and all this negative thinking and then all these negative emotions and you know what, I wasn't a lot of fun to be around when I wasn't drinking.

But I'm telling you this not because it's an indictment of who you are, I'm telling you this so you can start to really pay attention to your thoughts, because without realizing it, you have become very, very good, and very, very practiced at thinking a lot of un-fun thoughts. Just notice your inner dialogue the next time you go out and go to an event, notice that dialogue when you're getting ready, when you're headed there, when you arrive. Pay attention to that dialogue, tune into it, and you'll see what I mean. I guarantee you, it is overwhelmingly negative.

And I get it. I did this for such a long time. I was convinced that I wasn't fun if I wasn't drinking, and I was right. I wasn't fun. I was so stuck in my head thinking all these negative thoughts about how awkward I was, how uncomfortable I felt, what do I say, what do I do, the whole time looking for something in my external environment to relieve how I felt. But I wasn't fun because I didn't have fun thoughts. I wasn't being curious about other people, I wasn't curious about my surroundings, I wasn't curious about the world. I was 100% stuck in my head, fixated on my failings and my shortcomings, and feeling terrible. So you have to start paying attention to what you're thinking and notice your thoughts and notice how they're making you miserable if you want to learn how to have fun without relying on a drink, this is crucial.

So that's the first thought, but I want us to have a look at the second one, because this also comes up a lot for other people, and that thought is "This

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event will be so unbearable without a drink." Right? How many times have you thought that? How many times have you thought, "Oh god, am I going to have to do this without a drink in my hand? Why bother even going?"

I'll tell you, I remember being invited to a dry wedding when I was in my twenties, and it's so crazy when I think back on it. The entire time, my friends and I were fixated on where we could get alcohol and how we could sneak it in. Now, mind you, and this is so crazy, the wedding was in Thailand. It was my first trip to Asia, I was in a brand new country for the first time, you could not have picked a more exotic local, and yet my brain was like, "Oh my god, obviously this is not going to be any fun unless I'm drinking." My brain was so practiced to outsourcing fun to alcohol that it couldn't even see everything amazing around it that was staring it in the face, and I know - I know that you're like, look this isn't a wedding in Thailand that I'm talking about, right? Like this really is going to be a boring event. I'm really going to have to suffer through this holiday with my in-laws or have to go to this networking event. Whatever it is.

But I just want you to notice how narrow our focus can be when we outsource fun to alcohol. We get this kind of tunnel vision, and it becomes very difficult to see how things could be enjoyable because we have told ourselves over and over and over again that what makes something enjoyable is the drink. And I'll tell you something that I've realized. If the most interesting thing about the party or the people you're with is the alcohol, then I promise you, you are doing something wrong. The event isn't doing anything wrong, the people aren't doing anything wrong, you are doing something wrong.

You are so used to being passively entertained by dopamine that when you have to put forward the tiniest bit of effort to figure out how to have fun, your brain is like nope, no thank you, there's no point in going if I'm not drinking. But remember this all makes sense. I don't want you to start beating yourself up over this. This all makes sense because your brain wants to do easy things, and there is no easier thing than having a drink

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and giving yourself an influx of dopamine to change your perception of a situation.

Easy things offered humans an evolutionary advantage. Humans used to live in a world that took all this energy just to stay alive, and so being efficient, finding easy things to do helped us conserve energy. But being efficient about pleasure, that was the real boon. Seeking pleasure, avoid pain and do it be expending the least amount of energy possible, this is something I talk about a lot on the podcast. This was some motivational triad that kept humans alive for thousands of years. Pleasure was food and sex and warmth and those things kept us alive, and so for our brain to find easy ways to get pleasure seemed like we had hit the jackpot, but now we are in this world where we have such an abundance of easy pleasure.

We have all this easy pleasure that takes almost no energy to expend to get it. And so we keep returning to this easy pleasure, we keep having a drink to have a good time and keep returning to have a good time, without even realizing that we've outsourced fun to a drink. So then when we think about changing our drinking or when we think about taking a break, all of a sudden it's like, well okay, I guess I can, but then I'll sign up for this life of boredom.

So the only way to cut through this, the only way to change is to really understand how the think-feel-act cycle works to create fun, and your amusement, your enjoyment, your engagement, your excitement to really understand how your thoughts create those feelings, and only then can you see your way out of this predicament, out of the predicament where you have unwittingly learned to outsource fun to alcohol. Only then, once you understand it can you start to unwind the habit. But for most of you, if you don't understand that piece, you will just get stuck. You will get stuck because you don't want to sign up for a life of boredom.

So, for now, for this week, I just want you to notice how tied up alcohol and fun are in your world. How tied up it is in your perception of yourself and events and whether or not things are even worth doing, and if you realize, if you're listening and you realize wow, fun and alcohol really do go hand in

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hand in my mind, it's okay. Don't beat yourself up, this is totally normal. Nothing has gone wrong here, you need this awareness. You need to understand how much you rely on a drink to be a fun person, and how much you rely on a drink to enjoy an activity in order to take the first step to learn something different.

So for this week, just pay attention, just notice, and just ask yourself how much you have outsourced fun in your life to drinking, how much you have allowed alcohol to be in charge of whether or not you are fun, whether or not an event is fun. So that's it for this week, next week I'm going to be talking all about part two because I really do have a lot to say on this topic. In the meantime, if you have any questions, if you want to reach out, send me an email at podcast@rachelhart.com and otherwise, tune in next week and we'll be talking more about having fun. Bye everybody.

Alright, so before I go, I want to share with you a new free resource that I put together. If you are struggling to change your drinking, I created a worksheet – it's called Your Complete Picture – that I promise will completely change your perspective. I always tell people, if you only ever do one exercise about your drinking, do this one, it is that powerful. It is the exercise that changed everything for me. If you want to go grab it, all you need to do is go to rachelhart.com/picture and download it now.

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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