

Ep #35: Why You Should View Alcohol as Neutral



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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 35.

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, how are you? How are you doing on this very fine day? I'm really well, I'm doing good. And I decided that I want to spend today talking about a concept that I really only touch on in the very first episode of the podcast, and it's a concept that I think really sets my approach apart from other people when they talk about how to change your drinking, how to take a break.

And that concept is the idea of alcohol being morally neutral. That's what we're going to be talking about today, and this idea of being morally neutral means it's not good or bad. Drinking is not a vice, abstaining isn't a virtue. We're really stripping away all the right and wrong, good and bad from alcohol.

And I'll tell you, I've heard from a lot of you about this concept, and just saying that when you first heard me describe this, it was kind of like, "Wow, what's this woman talking about? What do you mean it's neutral? Alcohol's not neutral, alcohol is causing all these problems for me, I don't like it right now" or, "Alcohol is amazing. Alcohol is the best, it's not neutral." Right?

And so for a lot of you, this concept kind of blew your mind; the fact that it could be neutral and so that's what we're going to talk about today. Now, you are not alone if you have not previously seen alcohol as morally neutral, if you've never thought about it in this way. If you start to peer inside of your brain and start to examine what your brain thinks about alcohol, you are going to find a litany of right and wrong, good and bad.

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And you know what, it's not unique to booze. Our brain loves to categorize. If left unsupervised, our brain will endlessly categorize things as good or bad, and just put them into buckets. So here's the thing: you can either let this categorization happen automatically, or you can supervise and observe how your brain is putting things into buckets, and from there, because you now know about the think-feel-act cycle, understand okay, is this contributing to how I feel, is this contributing to how I act, is this contributing to the results I'm getting, if I'm endlessly labeling this thing as good or bad?

Now, if you like your drinking - well, if you do, you're probably not listening to this podcast, but if you like your drinking, if you like the results that you're getting before, during, and after, then what you think about alcohol isn't necessarily all that important. But if you want to change your drinking, if you want to change the habit, you are going to run head first into all of the thoughts that you have about what it means to drink, what it means not to drink, and what your drinking signifies about you as a person.

And this is why it's really interesting to understand and apply the concept of alcohol being morally neutral, and P.S. if you're one of my listeners who is also working on overeating, also working on changing that habit, and you think, "This sounds awfully familiar to the way that I think about food", you're totally right. Food also morally neutral, but most of us don't see it at that. Most of us are very quick to label food and our food choices as good or bad. So just listen right along because all of this applies to food as well.

When we want to change, most of us don't pay attention to what we're thinking about alcohol, right? Most of us just pay attention to, "Alright, I need to double down on my willpower and grit my teeth and just say no." We pay attention to that, just say no, over and over again, and use willpower and resist the urge. And if that fails, then guess what? We start beating ourselves up and we start to believe, "Hey, maybe something is wrong with me that I can't do this." That's where most of our focus normally is.

The option that I am suggesting to you, instead of just using willpower, is to actually start to retrain your brain, start to understand what is actually

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fuelling your desire. Why do you have these urges? Why do you feel like you're missing out if you're not drinking? Why do you sometimes drink more than you want to? And the way that you do that is by using the think-feel-act cycle instead of just relying on willpower.

And if you want to use the think-feel-act cycle, if you want to retrain your brain, then you must understand the thoughts you have about drinking. You cannot skip over this part. And listen, all of the thoughts you have about alcohol and about your drinking, they are just a series of judgments, both positive and negative that you have attached to alcohol; and usually, a series of judgments that you have attached unconsciously to alcohol.

And these judgments, these thoughts are affecting how you feel and driving how you act when it comes to drinking. You have to dive into your thoughts, you have to look at all the stories you have about alcohol. You have to be open to questioning them, you have to be open to holding them up to the light and seeing, is this thought useful? Or is it actually holding me back from the direction in which I want to go?

You know, I was actually listening to someone talk the other day about the importance of being open to the idea of changing your thoughts, and he said something that I thought was just so spot on. He said, "Most people will change almost everything in their life in an attempt to feel better." And so you'll go about changing how you look and changing your job and buying a new house and moving to a new town and finding a spouse or getting rid of your spouse.

We're willing to change so much just so we can feel better. But when it comes to questioning and changing your thoughts, most people buck. Most people say, "I can't change that. I can't change the way I think. That's just the way I am, that's not up for discussion." And the irony is, of course, that the only thing that will actually help you feel better is changing your thoughts.

All the other stuff, how you look, your job, your house, where you live, your spouse - look, it might make you feel momentarily better, but it's never

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going to sustain you in the long-run and you know this. How many times have you just thought, "If I could just get a new job" or "If I just didn't live in this tiny apartment" or "If I could just move to the city I want to be in."

Right? It doesn't sustain you in the long run because what's really creating how you feel is what you're thinking. That's what you have to be open to looking at and questioning and being willing to change. So if you decide that you want to be open to looking at your thoughts and looking at your thoughts around drinking, where do you begin?

The first place is to look at the thoughts that you have that are about your own use of alcohol. What are you telling yourself that your drinking means about you? And I will tell you that if you are in a place right now where you want to change, most of your thoughts probably go along the lines of, "I'm weak, I lack willpower, I lack discipline, maybe I feel like something's wrong with me, I feel so embarrassed, I just want to hide. Who I want to be isn't lining up with who I am when I'm drinking." You have to look at all those thoughts that you have about your own use of alcohol and really start to uncover them.

Now, remember if you are thinking negative thoughts and your thoughts create your feelings, guess what, you're not going to be producing a positive emotion. And if you're not producing a positive emotion, it's going to be that much harder to change. Now, I'm not suggesting that what you do is stick your head in the sand and pretend like everything's fine, but I am suggesting that you really pay attention to the language that you're using to talk about yourself and to talk about your struggle to change a habit right now and to really understand, "Hey, is that way that I'm talking about myself, is that thought, is it helping me or is it just making me feel worse? Is it just creating more shame and more embarrassment and all these negative emotions that don't help me change in the long run?"

The other place to look at if you are open to looking at your thoughts around alcohol is just to acknowledge that all of your thinking is wrapped up in a larger societal story of alcohol. All of it. The story of alcohol in our culture is steeped not in just morality, but also race and gender and class. I

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mean, it's all in there, and just - I mean, just think about it this way. We associate different drinks with different genders, right?

We have this idea like, beer, that's for the guys, right? Sparkling rose, that's for the ladies, right? We also associate different drinks with race and class, right? You know, we have very different thoughts and ideas that go along with moonshine versus champagne. And now I know some of you out there listening and thinking, "Wait, I don't have these associations. I'm a woman and I drink beer."

That's fine, but what I want you to be cognizant of is the fact that whether or not you subscribe to these societal messages, you are getting messages about alcohol all of the time. It is just steeped in our culture, you are immune to them, and so you have to pay attention to that and you have to pay attention to how these messages that you get from the wider society affect how you think about drinking as well.

The truth is that most people really never realize how alcohol starts to become a signifier of who they are, or who they think they are, and in more ways than just being a drinker or a non-drinker. Your brain starts to believe that alcohol and how you interact with it tells a larger story about who you are as a person. It's kind of crazy when you think about it, right?

But here's the thing. If it didn't, if this wasn't the case, then you would not be so worried about how you will be perceived if you decide to take a break. No one walks around worrying what people are going to think of them if they don't eat grapes, and if you know that person, send them my way. No one cares. We don't get all caught up in that.

And it's because we don't believe that our consumption of grapes matters at all, but if you don't drink wine, wow, that's a big deal. That's what our brain thinks because we have all these thoughts about how drinking or not drinking supposedly reveals something about who we are.

And the truth is, alcohol doesn't reveal anything about you. Alcohol is just alcohol. It is one oxygen atom, two carbon atoms, and six hydrogen atoms

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that come together to make ethanol. That's it. I love stripping it down this way. Like, let's just get to the bare bones of what it is. It's one oxygen, two carbon and six hydrogen atoms. It really kind of helps put into perspective what we are getting so worked up about and what our thoughts, what we are thinking about this thing.

And you know, the production of ethanol, it's a natural phenomenon. It's just this natural thing that happens in our world. Ethanol did not come into existence because of humans. You don't even need human intervention to create alcohol or to create ethanol. It's just the process of yeast fermenting sugars into alcohol and it can happen in overripe fruit, it can happen when sap drains out of a plant, you don't even need humans. Humans just figured out how to harness it.

Look, when it comes to life on this planet, things can grow, things can decompose, and things can ferment. Alcohol isn't a sin created by man. It is a natural byproduct of life on Earth, and if you want to get even more specific, it is the waste product that yeast excretes when they are trying to burn glucose in an oxygen deprived environment.

I really like putting it this way. I really like boiling it down to like, what is it really that we have so many hang-ups about? Let's just look at the science of it. Am I really always going to be missing out on life if I decide to take a break from consuming one oxygen, two carbon and six hydrogen atoms? Right? Am I really going to always feel like life will not be as good if I decide that I am no longer going to consume the waste produce of a single celled fungi?

I mean, I know that sounds kind of silly, but you have to really put it into perspective sometimes. You have to start to see you know, your thoughts and your stories about alcohol for what they really are. When you shift your perspective and you see that alcohol, ethanol, one oxygen, two carbon, six hydrogen atoms, yes, it's morally neutral. When you start to see it like that, you also realize that alcohol can't make you feel anything.

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Your thoughts about alcohol, that's what's making you feel something. Now sure, alcohol is an intoxicant, right? But before you ingest it, it just sits there. It's just sitting there in the bottle, or in the glass. It cannot will you to pick it up. It cannot persuade you to drink. It cannot create longing inside of you. It cannot tell you anything about who you are as a person. None of these things happen until you start having thoughts about it.

Unless someone is strapping you down to a table administering alcohol intravenously, the only way that happens is when you make a choice, when you make a decision that you are going to start drinking it. And the only way you make that choice, the only reason you ever take an action is because of the think-feel-act cycle. Alcohol is just sitting there. Alcohol just is, but we attribute so much power to it.

And by the way, if you're feeling the urge to drink or if you're feeling a lot of desire or if you're feeling like you're really missing out if you're not drinking, none of these feelings are created by alcohol. All of these feelings are created by a thought. All of these feelings were created by thoughts like, "That looks tasty. I want it, I need it. I deserve a treat, I deserve a break." These are the thoughts that were running through your mind that kicked off the think-feel-act cycle, that created the desire in you that caused the action of you deciding to drink.

And then once you did, your brain was rewarded with a concentrated hit of dopamine. So your brain got a reward for thinking these thoughts. Now, at this point, because you have developed a habit, it may feel like there's no thought there. That's what I hear from a lot of people. It's like, "There's no thought, I just like walked into the kitchen and before I knew it, I had a glass of wine in my hand." Right?

But there is a thought. There always is a thought. That desire or that urge, it doesn't appear out of nowhere, and the only reason it feels like you can't pinpoint what that thought is is because the habit, the thought part of the habit has gone unconscious as part of the habit cycle. If you want to uncover what it is, all you have to do is start building in that pause. All you have to do is decide like, "Hey, you know what, I'm not going to drink

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tonight when I get home" and let me tell you, you will very quickly meet those thoughts that are part of the habit cycle.

Alcohol is neutral, and you know what, your desire is neutral too. Your desire also doesn't mean anything about you, other than you unconsciously created a habit without intending to. And you know what, the choice to drink is neutral. Beyond that, your results, the results that you get from drinking, they're neutral too. They're just a bunch of data points that you get to look at. You get to determine if you want to repeat the same action again and get the same result.

You have to start stripping away the good and the bad and the right and the wrong from all of this. And I will tell you, for as much as people are kind of excited to hear about, "Oh my gosh, this thing is morally neutral? It doesn't have to be all wrapped up into right and wrong?" I also get a lot of pushback on this idea.

And the argument usually goes like this. Well, if you consume too much alcohol, it can have all these negative effects, so it can negatively affect your health. If you really consume way too much, your body can actually become physically dependent on it, but it can also negatively affect your relationships and your decision making and your behavior, right? So then obviously it can't be neutral, it must be bad.

But here's the thing, and I want you to consider this. Alcohol can have positive effects too. And I'm not just talking about in terms of celebrating and having a good time. Really think about it. Alcohol is a holy sacrament in a lot of major world religions. Now, there are some religions that strictly forbid the consumption of alcohol, so if you think about Islam or Mormonism, but there are many other religions that actually plays alcohol in the center of their most important ritual.

So all you have to think about is - if you're thinking about Christianity, red wine, that is the alcohol of choice, and it's used as a spiritual symbol for the blood of Christ during Holy Communion. And Christianity is not unique in this. Now, here's the thing. When you start to really think about this, it's

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really no wonder that ancient people and the beginnings of the creation of religions, the people who were starting to practice religion, viewed alcohol as having this kind of holy place, because alcohol seemed kind of otherworldly.

And not just for its effect; its intoxicating effect to temporarily transport you outside of yourself, but because for most of human history, we had no idea how the transformation of wheat and grapes and potatoes and rice and honey, how that transformation happened into this substance that had mind-altering properties. That was a really deep mystery. We didn't get it.

So you can see that even though humans have been making beer and wine, even though we've harnessed the production of alcohol throughout civilization, really for the longest time, humans did it with only the crudest understanding of what they were doing.

So here's the thing. You can see there are both negative effects and positive effects. So which is it? If there are both negative and positive, which side wins? Is it good or bad? And what I want to say is neither. Alcohol just is alcohol.

So the second place after people hear me out on this, what most people who are kind of struggling with this idea of alcohol being morally neutral will say, "Okay fine, alcohol is just alcohol, but then how I use it, that makes me good or bad." Like again, we just love attaching labels to things being good or bad.

So if alcohol is neutral, if I get people on board with that, then they start to say, "Okay, well then what I do with it - I must be good or bad." And you hear this all the time. You hear this all the time especially when people are working on changing a habit. And they'll say things like, "I've been so good all week. I haven't had anything to drink" or "Oh my god, I was so bad on Saturday, I got hammered."

Right? We are so quick to subscribe to these labels and attach them to ourselves and decide like, "Okay, maybe alcohol is neutral, but I'm good or

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bad." Right? But when you attach these labels, you're treating alcohol as something other than alcohol. Suddenly it becomes a marker of your character. When you start saying, "I was so good" or "I was so bad", when you start attaching those labels to yourself, all of a sudden it's becoming a marker of you who are.

And there are really three problems with this. The first is you can very quickly turn it into a thought process of justifying your actions. And it really does sound like, "I've been so good all week, I really deserve a treat." Now, think about it. You only ever deserve something or think you deserve something if you've been suffering. If you feel like, "I've earned it, I'm worthy of it" and you start creating that juxtaposition - "I've been so good, so now I get to be bad. Now I deserve the treat." And so many people will talk about it in this kind of treat or reward idea. So that is the first thing that when you attach these labels to your character about the use of alcohol, about drinking or not drinking, all of a sudden it becomes a way that your brain likes to use to justify your actions.

Now, the second problem is also around binging. And it goes something like this: "If I'm going to be bad, I want to be really bad." Right? Does this sound familiar? It's like, alright, well - and it usually goes along with the justifying piece. Like, "I've been so good, I really deserve a treat. Now I'm going to be bad, but like, I might as well get all my badness in. might as well cram as much in, in as little time as possible."

And so you - when you start to apply these labels again, to your decision to drink or not to drink as being good or being bad, do not be surprised when all of a sudden, you wake up really hungover the next morning, because the night before, your brain was like, "I'm being bad, so like, let's really be bad. Let's do it up on badness." So that binging piece is one to think about.

And then the third is this idea of rebellion. And I think that this is something that a lot of you out there can really relate to. And so all of a sudden, in your decision about whether or not you're going to drink starts to turn into "I have to be good, I have to be good, I have to be good." And you're being good, my guess is, about so many things, so much else in your life. It's not

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just around drinking. "I have to be good, I have to be good, I have to be good." And you know what, you get to the end of the week and you're kind of tired of being perfect, right?

If you're telling yourself you have to be good all the time, you are eventually going to want to rebel and be bad. I promise you. If this becomes - if your decision to not drink becomes something about being good, "I'm being so good, I'm being so good, I'm being so good", you will eventually run up against the thought, "I just want to be bad. I just really want to rebel. I don't want to have to be good anymore", right?

So you can start to see that if you say, "Okay, maybe I can get on board with alcohol being morally neutral, but like I'm going to take those good and bad labels and just apply them to myself", not going to help you so much. You're going to get caught in these loops of justifying and bingeing and rebelling, and I promise that that is happening because you are suddenly making your decision to drink or to not to drink as a marker of your character, a symbol of whether or not you are right or wrong, good or bad.

And the truth is, that it is not a marker of your character. It means nothing about you. It is as meaningless as your decision to eat grapes or not eat grapes. Totally neutral. So I really wanted to just spend this episode diving into this topic because it was something that I hadn't talked about before, and I want you to try it on for size.

Try it on for size, this idea that not only is alcohol neutral, but your decisions around drinking or not drinking are also neutral. See how your brain resists the idea. See if your brain really wants to attach and latch on to good or bad. But I promise that you have to first start by just looking at the thinking, looking at the automatic, unconscious thoughts that are there that you have about what drinking and alcohol, what it means about you and who you are and the results that you have right now in your life.

Because you have to be able, you have to be willing to not only look at your thoughts, but be willing to change them if you want to use the think-feel-act cycle, because your thoughts matter so much. Don't ever think that they

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don't. What you think around alcohol, what you think around your decision to drink or to not to drink matters so much more than you are telling yourself right now.

So that's it for this week. You can always email me at podcast@rachelhart.com. Let me know how it goes, let me know what you discover when you try it on for size, that alcohol and your decisions around alcohol are neutral. Otherwise, I'll see you next week.

Hey guys, if you want to go over to iTunes and leave a review about the podcast if you're enjoying it, I would love it. But not only that; I am giving everyone who does a free urge meditation. I will tell you, this meditation, it is super simple. All it takes is five minutes and a pair of headphones. If you are having an urge and you want a different way to handle it, just pop those headphones in, find a place where you can sit down undisturbed and teach your brain, retrain your brain a very simple method to make urges more tolerable. All you need to do is head on over to rachelhart.com/urge and input your information there.

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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