

## Ep #54: Why I Don't Use Labels



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Rachel Hart**

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## Ep #54: Why I Don't Use Labels

You are listening to the *Take a Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, episode 54.

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, we are talking about labels today, and labeling. It's a really, really important topic. I talk about this all the time, but I haven't yet talked about it on the podcast. Now, I have talked about it in my book, *Why Can't I Drink Like Everyone Else?* The book, it came out as an eBook at the end of 2016 and it is now out in print. You can get yourself a paperback, which I love, because I love writing in the margins of books. I love taking notes. You can actually buy it on Amazon.

Anyway, if you have a copy of that book, you will see right at the very beginning, I have an author's note. I have a note describing how I do not use labels like alcoholic, sober, or recovered, either in the book or to describe myself, and I talk about why I do this. And the reason why I put an author's note at the beginning of the book was because this is really unusual. In society, we are very used to talking about the issue of overdrinking using these labels. Alcoholic, sober, recovered, or recovery. And I'm putting forward a very different way of thinking about it, so I wanted to have an author's note the very beginning kind of saying, "Hey, listen, it's going to sound a little different in here and here's why."

So I know some of you might be thinking, "Wait a minute. Don't I hear labels in the introduction to the podcast? Aren't you saying - aren't you talking about alcoholics and addicts in the introduction? What's going on? I don't understand." And that's what I want to talk to you guys today. I want to talk to you, one, about why this is, how this fits in to my framework for how I understand and see and use labels. I also want to talk about whether or not you should label yourself.

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I know that for me, this was something that I thought about for a very long time. If I have a problem drinking more than I want, does that mean I'm an alcoholic? Do I need to label myself? Is that the only way that I can finally resolve this problem?

I also want to explore how labels can be harmful. I think this is a really important piece of the puzzle for everyone to understand, and then why do we use labels in the first place. Why do humans use labels? What is their purpose?

Now, before I dive in, I'm going to tell you this. What you're about to hear is my perspective. There are a lot of different perspectives out there on labels and whether or not they're a good thing or a bad thing. So keep that in mind. You can use or not use whatever label you want. You don't have to agree with my perspective. Some people find labels empowering. I have met people and I know people who say, "You know, the moment that I finally admitted to myself that I was an alcoholic, that's what changed everything. That's where all my power came from."

But I know other people who find labels incredibly stigmatizing, and they will do anything not to have to wear a label. I'm going to talk about why that is. So remember this: labels work differently for different people, and guess why? Because of the think-feel-act cycle. Of course, what a label means to me and what a label means to you could be two very different things. So it is up to you to decide what works best for you.

Okay, so what is a label? A label is just a word or a phrase that describes or identifies something or someone. It's a descriptor that we affix to a person or an object, and I like that word 'affix', right? Because you can imagine kind of, peeling a label off a sheet and sticking it on a person, right? That's what a label is. And you can have labels about anything.

You can have labels about your intellect, right? You're smart, or you're stupid. Labels about your body. I'm fat or I'm skinny. Labels about your place of origin. I'm from the East coast, you're a Midwesterner, your political leanings. They're a liberal and I'm a conservative. Labels about

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race, labels about religion, labels about socioeconomic class. We find tons of things to label in our environment. So the question is, why do we do it? Why do we label people?

Here's what I know. Labels are a tool that humans developed to resolve the complexity of our environment. So think about it this way. We have all this data around us, right? All this information, and labels help us arrange all that data into clusters. Now, humans believe that labels also help us predict people's behavior. Now, I'm going to talk about this a little bit because a lot of times we're very incorrect with this assumption.

But our brain likes to label because it saves energy. We are in this data rich environment. There is information and data all around us, and remember, the brain likes to find ways to be efficient, and labeling is very efficient. It's very simple. It's very fast. I can just slap a label on you. And so what happens, the downside is that we get into the habit of thinking that all we need to know about someone is a label.

I see this happen all the time, especially in today's really polarized political environment. We think all we need to know about someone is the label of their political party. "She's a democrat" or, "He's a republican, end of conversation. All I need to know." So you can see how this can be problematic. Yes, our brain is saving energy. Just because our brain figures out ways to save energy does not necessarily mean it's helpful in the long run. We see this with habits all the time, including the habit of drinking more than you intend.

So labels make people seem simpler than they are. Humans are incredibly complex. We are these incredibly multifaceted beings, right? But it's so much easier to categorize someone with a label and tell ourselves, like, "I got them figured out" rather than to actually spend the time and energy to get to know someone. It takes time and energy to have to actually sit down and talk with someone and discover, learn about them, find out about them. It's so much easier just to slap on a label.

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So labels might be adaptive when it comes to humans and the human brain and wanting to save energy, but you can see how they also cause problems. Because a label defines ourselves and others by this incredibly narrow set of parameters. We've boiled someone down to their intellect or their body size, or their place of origin, or their political leanings, or their race, their religion, their socioeconomic status. That's what we've boiled someone down to.

And it gets worse because when some of these labels are rife with stigma and stereotype, then the label doesn't just save the brain energy by just labeling someone, slapping on that label, but it also can determine what the brain actually sees about others because we interpret all the information that we get through the lens of that label.

So I want to give you guys a concrete example about this, and it's actually outside of the realm of drinking. I've talked about this before, but before I became a coach, my background was in human rights. I spent a decade working on human rights, social justice issues, civil liberties, and that was the very first place that I was really exposed to and really began to understand why labels can be so problematic.

So I was working with activists all around the world, helping them hone their messages when they were talking to the public, when they were talking to reporters or policy makers, and it was incredibly, incredibly rewarding work because I felt like I was making a really big difference in the struggle that these activists were working on to make the world a better place. And I remember I was working with some disability rights activists, and I was interviewing one of them as practice for a TV presentation that she was going to do, and I remember she said something that so stuck with me.

She said, "I am not disabled. My environment is disabling." Now, I want you to really hear that because it took me a second the first time that I heard it. "I am not disabled. My environment is disabling." Now listen, I was so used to and had been brought up labeling people by their disabilities, right, so

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pointing someone out and saying, "That's a blind person", "That's a deaf person."

And so the label made me see the person as the problem. The problem resided with the person. And what this activist said to me was such a huge shift. Really kind of blew my mind, because instead of labeling the person as a problem, she shifted the focus to the environment. She said, "The environment is disabling, that is what disables me. I am not disabled. It is my environment." And so the problem became looking at the environment and how that environment around her was not suited to her.

And this made me realize that I was so used to labeling and using labels in a way that really shaped where my brain identified and saw the problem. So I usually saw the problem with the person, the entity wearing the label was where the problem resided. I wasn't used to thinking about the environment as being where the problem was and I will tell you, the exact same thing is true with how we talk about drinking.

So the most common label, in fact, really the only label out there is alcoholic. We are so used to labeling the person as the problem, or where the problem resides, that we don't spend any time looking at the environment or considering how the environment might cause a problem.

I will tell you this. No one teaches us the skills that we need to know to manage our urges, to manage our negative emotions, or to manage our desires, especially in a world, in a modern world where there's so much desire around us, right? There's so much that produces reward for our brain. No one teaches us any of the skills that we need.

So I think back to what I was taught about drinking. I was taught the following. One, just say no. Two, drinking too much makes you drunk. How much that amount was I had no idea. Three, don't drink and drive. Four, you shouldn't drink until you're 21. That was it. That was literally all the information I was given about drinking. Just say no, drinking too much makes you drunk, don't drink and drive, and you shouldn't drink until you're 21. That is all the information that I was given.

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And I will tell you, in my own life, you know, I wasn't surrounded by cautionary tales. A lot of people will talk to me about that. You know, I have a lot of friends who have never really been that into alcohol, and sometimes you know, a reason that will often be cited is, "Well, I saw these cautionary tales. I was surrounded by people who were overdrinking and I didn't want to replicate that."

I didn't have that in my life. My parents drink alcohol, they still drink alcohol, but they really don't drink a lot. My dad is one of those guys that has half a beer and gets sleepy. And so I wasn't surrounded by cautionary tales, I really was not given any information on how to manage my urges, how to manage negative emotions, how to manage desire, and so I walked into that first college party when I was 17 years old and unsurprisingly, it was a disaster. I had no tools in my tool belt.

Now, I think about that and I think, "Imagine how things could have been different if the next day there was someone or something or some resource where I could have learned some tools, where someone could have educated me, someone to talk to me about, 'Hey, you know what, I understand last night you were feeling super anxious at that party and so you reached for a drink but there's a different way to handle your negative emotions. You don't need to cover them up.'"

Or someone to talk to me about managing urges, right? Someone to talk to me about how focusing on the thoughts running through my mind would actually give me the information I needed to understand why I felt insecure and awkward and out of place, like I didn't measure up so often. And I think, "God, if I'd had that information, things could have been so different for me" but of course, none of that happened.

And you know, it's funny because the truth is, thinking back, you know, I had no idea how to manage my urges when it came to food. I mean, I had learned at a much earlier age, unconsciously, I wasn't knowingly learning this but I had taught myself, "You feel bad, you come home from school and you're feeling all this negative emotion, just have something to eat."



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So I really had no idea how to manage urges when it came to food. So what chance did I have at managing urges when it came to alcohol, something that produces a much bigger reward in my brain? And I'll tell you, I think this is where we go wrong with how we label people who overdrink. Because the label 'alcoholic' is all about the person, right? That's where the problem resides rather than understanding that there's a problem in the environment.

No one's teaching us the skills we need to manage our urges, manage our emotions, and understand how our thoughts create our desire. So alcoholic really is the most common and widely used label out there for anyone who struggles with drinking or overdrinking.

Now, there are more problems than just the fact that the focus is all on the person. There's no in between, right? The label 'alcoholic' basically sets up this idea that either you're a normal drinker or you're an alcoholic, and that's it. There's this false impression that there are only two kinds of people. It's this very black and white understanding of either you have a problem or you don't.

And that label of alcoholic doesn't reflect that people's relationship with alcohol and how they use alcohol, how they drink it can change in different contexts and over time. It can change - a lot of people will say to me, "You know, alcohol was never really an issue for me and then this thing happened. I got divorced" or, "My kids left for college" or, "I lost someone really close to me and all of a sudden my drinking started to change."

Or people will also talk to me about, "You know what, I was never really a big drinker in college. I wasn't like you, Rachel. You talk about you know, drinking a lot in college. I didn't really drink a lot but now here I am in my 40s or my 50s and it's like, where did this come from?" So that label doesn't reflect that people's relationship with alcohol and how we use alcohol changes over time, because of course, it's just this label that you slap on. This is just who you are.



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And I think the label also doesn't reflect that there is a progression, there is a progressive nature to the problem, right? In reality, problematic drinking is on this spectrum. It's not either or. At one end of the spectrum, kind of mildly risky behavior, and at the other end is a severe problem where your body is truly physically addicted, where your body gets sick without alcohol.

Now, here's the thing. Nobody starts out at the severe end. Some people might get there over time, but nobody has one drink and is immediately physically addicted. That is something that happens over time and with repetition, and I say this as someone who you know, even though my first experience with drinking in college, I drank too much, you know, I wasn't immediately on the other end of the spectrum. In fact, I never got there.

The truth is that only about 10% of people who overdrink fall into that most severe category of being truly physically addicted, but we only have one label to talk about this entire progression. So the label 'alcoholic', it doesn't reflect the different degrees of struggle, and there are many, many different degrees of struggle.

So we're using this label, alcoholic, that makes the person the problem rather than the fact that most of us are raised in an environment where no one teaches us how to manage our urges, manage our negative emotions, or manage our desires, right? The other problem is that it's just one label to describe many degrees of struggle. It creates this false dichotomy, this black and white idea that either you're a normal drinker or you're not, and there's no in between, which is so wrong.

And then you know, the third thing is that on top of all of this, the kind of cultural narratives that we have for understanding people who overdrink is just rife with stigma and stereotype. You know, I talk about this a lot in the book, I talk about the different frameworks out there to understand why people drink more than they want, and there are a couple different models.

One model is this idea of the disease model. The disease model says, "Okay, people who drink too much, they have an incurable disease, something's wrong with their brain, they're powerless and the only cure is

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to remove alcohol entirely." And then you have what I call the character defect model. And the character defect model is basically people who drink too much have something wrong with their character. They prioritize pleasure over everything, including their wellbeing, the wellbeing of loved ones, they're selfish, they're manipulators, they're liars, and the only way out of this problem is to acknowledge the defects of character to atone for your wrongs and misdeeds and to work at being a better person.

Now listen, I have problems with both of these frameworks. And the fact of the matter is that the two of them overlap to really form the wider cultural understanding of overdrinking, and frankly, misinform the wider cultural understanding of overdrinking. But now think of it this way. Now you've got this label that makes the person the problem, it doesn't reflect any degrees of struggle. It doesn't reflect at all that your relationship with alcohol can change over time and in different contexts. And now on top of it, we've thrown all this stigma on top of it.

And you can imagine how it prevents people from seeking out help because labels carry with them the belief that drinking too much somehow reflects something about your essence. It does not reflect anything about your essence. It is not a sign that something is wrong with you, something is wrong with your character, right? What that label does is it reduces a complex multifaceted person into a single behavior, drinking too much. Not only that, but it reduces that person into a behavior that society has deemed as an example of not only being powerless, but that there's something wrong with your character. You become the problem.

So on top of all of this, I will tell you that one of my very biggest problems is that the label 'alcoholic' has become a requirement in many, many places to seek out help. It's this idea that you must label yourself. You must say, "Hi, I'm Rachel, and I'm an alcoholic" and that's forever and ever and ever and ever.

And now listen, I know that there are people out there that find this empowering. But I know so many people, myself included who find this incredibly stigmatizing, especially given the misguided frameworks that we

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have out there to explain why people struggle with their drinking. I talk about this a lot in my book but if you take a look at the book, I'm not talking about a disease model, I'm not talking about a character defect model. What I'm talking about is understanding a learning model, what we are teaching our brain when we drink unconsciously, and is understanding that, what we're teaching our brain that makes such a big difference.

When the only help out there is help that requires wearing a label for the rest of your life, a lot of people are not going to seek help, and I was one of them. I was not willing to wear a label that said that I was powerless or that the only way to fix a problem was to work at being a better person. It just - aside from the label, just everything about it didn't resonate with my situation. And when the predominant cultural narrative connected to a specific label is rife with stigma and shame and stereotype, that label is going to keep people hiding. It is going to keep people suffering in silence, and that I think is a big problem.

Now listen. You know, the label 'alcoholic' is actually considered by many researchers to be not only a negative term for all the reasons that I have described, but also really outdated. And the most current addition of the DSN, that is the diagnostic manual published by the American Psychiatric Association that sets the standard language for how to talk about disorders, it doesn't use the term 'alcoholic'. The term used to describe problematic drinking is alcohol use disorder. Not alcoholic.

So after hearing me talk about all of this, why then am I using the term alcoholic in the intro to my podcast? Well, there's good reason behind this. I want people to know, I want you to know, I want anyone who tunes in to know from the get go that I believe that there are different degrees of struggle. So what I do is I take the only label used by 99% of people in society, and I use it as a way to differentiate the work that I am doing.

So here's the thing. If you are physically addicted, if you cannot get through the day without having alcohol or else your body gets sick, you may very well need a different approach. But remember, there is a spectrum of struggle. Only 10% of people are at that far end of the spectrum. And I

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want people to know that there is a resource out there for people who are not there. So that's why I choose to use it in the intro.

Now, I know this is one of my longer podcasts so I'm not going to go too in depth on these other labels, but I do want to talk quickly about the labels 'sober' and 'recovered' because I don't use either of them, and I want you to understand why. So the first thing I'll tell you is I never say that I'm sober. I've never used that label, never felt right, it never felt authentic to me, and I'll tell you in part because the fact that I make the choice not to drink feels like such a minor part of my life.

So when I'm asked my people that don't know me, I usually will say, "I don't drink" and if they want to know further, I usually say like, "It's not my thing" because the truth is, it really isn't my thing. I mean, it was my thing for a long time. It really was. It was the only way I thought I could access this kind of fun, smart, outgoing, confident Rachel. But now I know like, oh my gosh, I don't need that at all. In fact, that actually covers up. That's not accessing my true self. That's accessing a real kind of lesser version of myself.

And I think the other thing is you know, sober often connotes this idea of "I can't drink" and this is a huge thing I talk with you guys about all the time. You always can. That choice is available. You have free will, right? Unless you're listening to this in prison. You can make the choice, and the thing is like, I choose not to because I don't want to, because I have changed my desire. I also think - I mean, I really like kind of digging into words and thinking about what they bring up for me, but sober, it just - when I think about it is someone that has this really serious attitude and they're kind of moving through life in this solemn way, and you know, they're kind of sedate and subdued and they don't have kind of excessive or extreme qualities of emotion, and I'm just like, "That is not me."

Like, I don't feel like any of that describes me at all. I do feel like it describes a puritan in the 1600s that's dressed in black wool from head to toe, but I think like, sober, all of those words, all of the kind of definitions that go with it, even outside of the realm of drinking, that just doesn't feel

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like me. I don't feel like a particularly serious or solemn person. I actually feel like the opposite.

Now, I know that there are people out there who try to reclaim the word sober, and by reclaim, I mean take the label and try to show that it can mean something different. And you know, with sober in particular, you know I've heard people talk about kind of like how it can be hip or how it can be fun, and you know, more power to them. I'm totally right on board if anybody wants to try and reclaim a word but it just doesn't fit with how I see myself, and just doesn't really resonate with me.

So I mean, I think in part I don't really want to reclaim it because I just don't see not drinking as this kind of defining characteristic of who I am. It's such a non-event to me. It's like introducing myself and being like, "Listen, it is really important that you know that I don't eat grapes or potatoes or wheat." Right? I'd be like, that is like, so not important in the realm of things that I think you should know about me. And you know, so that's where I come down on that label.

Again, you know it's really up to you to figure out what feels right, what you like using, what feels authentic for you. I'll tell you, 'recovered' or 'in recovery' is another really interesting label. You know, it's not one that I use because when I think of the word 'recovered', I think of the idea that you're becoming healthy after an illness or an injury. You're returning to normal health. That's what recovered suggests to me, and I think about that and I think about how I've been able to totally change my drinking and totally change my desire and totally change how I handle negative emotions and manage my urges and not only pay attention to my thinking but change a lot of the thoughts I was having automatically. And I think like, I'm not returning to anything. I'm not returning to a healthy state because I didn't have these skills before. I never had the skill how to manage my thoughts, or how to manage negative emotions, or how to manage urges. Nobody taught me that in the first place, so how could I possibly recover back to that?

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If anything, you know, I didn't recover. I grew. I learned. I expanded. But I didn't at all go back to where I started. I didn't at all go back to you know, that day before I set foot on a college campus, because where I was on that day is actually what caused me to overdrink in the first place. So that's my take on 'recovered' and 'in recovery'. Again, I think use what works for you. What makes you feel empowered?

That is where I want you to focus. Never be told that you must accept a label or you must wear a label. And especially not if that label is rife with stigma and stereotype, or if it suggests that you are somehow the problem, because I will tell you, you are not the problem. Your brain is not the problem. You and your brain, they are the answer to figuring this out. It's just no one has given you the information before. And that's what I hope this podcast is doing for you.

So I know this was a little bit longer today. I hope you guys found this interesting, gave you a little more insight into why I don't use these labels. As always, if you have any questions, if you'd like to hear me cover a specific topic on the podcast, you can always send me an email at [podcast@rachelhart.com](mailto:podcast@rachelhart.com). Otherwise, I will see you guys 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](http://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

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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](https://RachelHart.com/join) and start your transformation today.