

**Ep #120: Listener Q&A:
Handling Comments About Not Drinking**



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Rachel Hart

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You are listening to the *Take A Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, episode 120.

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.

Hello, hello everybody. We are going to do another listener Q&A today. So this is when I answer the questions that you have about taking a break, about drinking, about the think-feel-act cycle, any questions that you have, just send them in. You can send them in to podcast@rachelhart.com.

So today, I'm going to be answering a question about how to handle people's comments when you decide to take a break from drinking. So here was the question that was sent in. "I've been having some circumstances where some supportive people in my life have been asking my questions about taking a break. They're doing it because they're trying to be helpful. These are not strangers at a dinner party. It's my brother, my boyfriend, and my closest friends.

I've moved past the point where the questions make me feel uncomfortable or bad but I'm a little awkward with responding to them. I've tried using tools and just explaining, "I just don't want to." Here are some of the things that people have said. "I feel really guilty drinking in front of you," "Does this mean we're never going to wine country again?" "The only experience I have with alcoholism is my stepmother," "I don't trust people who don't drink."

I don't think it would be very natural for me to launch right into my drinking is a neutral circumstance until you have a thought about it. I've tried to start explaining the think-feel-act cycle but that's a big concept to really wrap your brain around."

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Oh my god, I love this question so much. I also love your use of circumstance. Really doing some great work understanding how to apply the think-feel-act cycle and how to separate circumstances from thought. So you're doing fantastic work.

Now, here's the thing, I'm going to explain all of this to you. I'm going to go actually into each of these four comments that you've received from other people, but I want you to know, what I'm talking about today, you're going to be able to apply this work to anything because it's not just the decision to not drink and people's comments where we're trying to struggle how do I answer, how do I respond, what do I say.

Of course, it happens in all areas of our life, and that's why I think this work is so important and the work is so transformative because you really are teaching your brain a meta-skill. So I watch this happen all the time with my clients. We learn about the think-feel-act cycle and remember, when I learned about it for the first time and we are kind of blown away that how we feel is because of what we are thinking.

It's not what is happening out in the world. It's what we're making it mean. It's our interpretation of what is happening. Learning the think-feel-act cycle is so amazing, it's such a revelation. And what do people start to do? We start to try to explain it to people, and I will tell you, I am the first one that is guilty of doing this when I was first studying to be a coach, I remember too many conversations where I was like, "Listen, I know right now that you're having a feeling but let me explain why that is. It's not because of me, it's because of your thoughts."

I'm going to tell you guys, this is a very bad idea. A really bad idea. And it's hard and we have the best intentions because it is super exciting to finally learn a framework that explains how you feel. It's like discovering that the world is round when this entire time you thought that it was flat and wanting to tell everyone who thinks it's flat, no, guys, it's round.

So uncovering this information, it is like the most amazing news ever. That's how I thought about it. I know that's how so many of you think about

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this. But listen, not everybody wants to hear the news, and not only that, you got to let people discover this if they're going to on their own.

So the very first thing is for you to examine why do you want people to know? Why do you want people to understand that drinking is a neutral circumstance, or why do you want people to know that how they feel about your decision not to drink has to do with their thoughts, not your actions?

Why does your brother or your boyfriend or your family or closest friends, why do they need to know that their thoughts create their feelings? So let's go into this. Let's break it down for all four of these comments.

So the first comment was, "I feel really guilty drinking in front of you." I'm going to tell you, this used to happen to me a lot, especially at first. So it makes a lot of sense because culturally, we are taught that if people drink more than they want, so if people find themselves overdrinking and then they decide not to drink, that it means that they shouldn't be around alcohol when they're not drinking.

This really is a widely held belief. The idea that if you have ever struggled with your drinking, then being around alcohol is simply too tempting because we have this idea that people who drink too much are powerless, they don't have control.

Now, if you listen to this podcast, you know I don't agree with this. I don't think any of that is true. Alcohol just sits there, alcohol doesn't tempt you. It's just sitting there, it's not doing anything. It's not enticing you to pick it up. Your thoughts tempt you.

And the best news that you can ever take away from this work and learning about the think-feel-act cycle is that your thoughts are optional. You can decide to change your thoughts and to think different thoughts on purpose. Why that isn't information that we learn when we're really young, I don't know. I think it should be.

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Here's the thing; believing that you need to isolate yourself from being around alcohol is the belief that alcohol not only creates your desire but also that your desire for alcohol is unchangeable. It's fixed. This is not right. The desire that you feel is created by your mind, it's created by what you're thinking, the thoughts that are running through your head.

Thoughts like, "That looks good, I want some, a drink will make this better, I'll have more fun." Those are the thoughts creating temptation. Those are the thoughts creating desire. Listen, if you listen to this podcast, you now know that your desire to drink is created by your thoughts, so you don't have to isolate yourself. You don't have to say, "I'll never be around alcohol," but the person who says, "I feel really guilty for drinking in front of you," they don't know this.

And the question for you to consider, and it's really a serious question is do they need to know? Right now, a lot of you may be thinking yeah, they should know, everybody should know this. And you might find yourself wanting to explain the think-feel-act cycle.

But here's what happens. When you think that they need to know that alcohol doesn't create your desire, when you get all wrapped up in that, you are totally focused on the wrong place. Because here's the thing; if someone is feeling guilty about a decision that you are making, it has everything to do with their thoughts.

And their thoughts, not only can you not only control them, but really, they're not your business. And making them your business in all circumstances, making other people's thoughts your business, it never leads to good things because that's when we get all weird and creepy and we want to change it.

So the person who says, "I feel kind of guilty drinking in front of you," they may have a thought, "Oh, it's not right to drink in front of people who aren't drinking, I may be making this too tempting, maybe I'm being a bad friend." They could be thinking any of those things to be creating guilt.

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But my answer is always they don't need to know that the desire that you have for alcohol is created by your thoughts, not what they're doing. And here's why, because I know this is an area where a lot of you really want to explain this to other people. You have to ask yourself why do you want them to understand the think-feel-act cycle? Why do you want them to understand that desire is created by thoughts and the alcohol is neutral and it just sits there?

I'll tell you that the answer is because you want them to feel differently. You want them to stop feeling guilty. You want to change how they feel so that you can feel better. But their feeling guilty is only a problem because you think they shouldn't feel that way.

Now stay with me. I know that this can get a little convoluted, but seriously, what if it is okay for someone else to feel guilty? What if you are not in charge of making them feel better? Because you know what, if you decide that you're in charge of making them feel better, not only are you going to be bending and contorting yourself and trying to change your actions in the hopes that they will feel differently, but simply you can't do it.

Trying to change how someone else feels so that you can feel better is just people-pleasing. That's what it is. It's wanting to change someone else's feelings so that you can have a better feeling. It doesn't work. When we are people-pleasing, we always end up unhappy because we're making decisions against ourselves. We're making decisions because we think that they will change how someone else feels when it's not what we want.

So here's the thing; what do you say when someone asks, "Is it okay to drink around you," or, "I feel kind of guilty drinking?" Here's what I do. I just say, "Yeah, no problem." The end. No explanation needed. Because here's what I know. Even when I say to someone, "Yeah, no problem, go right ahead," some people are going to be totally reassured that I'm fine.

They're going to have a thought, "I believe Rachel." And other people will not be reassured at all. Their thoughts will be totally different. They might be thinking something like, "She's just trying to be nice but you really

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shouldn't do it." But you know what, the thoughts someone else is having is not my business and it's not your business.

My business is what I am thinking and how I feel and understanding whether or not those two things are serving me. I stay out of their business and that's what you need to do.

The second comment - I love this one. I've gotten variations of this in my own life as well. "Does this mean we're never going to wine country again?" So when I was first taking a break -and I talk about this a lot. In my 20s, I flip-flopped back and forth between drinking and not drinking, but those attempts to change my drinking, all of that flip-flopping, it was always just gritting my teeth and crossing days off a calendar.

I didn't understand the think-feel-act cycle, I didn't understand how habits worked. So when I talk about first taking a break, that was me first learning about the think-feel-act cycle and that your thoughts create your feelings and how habits work and understanding the brain.

So when I first did that the very first time, about a month in, maybe it was two months in, I went to Paris for a weekend trip with friends. And I will tell you, this is the beauty of living in New York City, you can hop on an overnight plane to Europe. You leave at night and you're in New York and you wake up in the morning and you're in Paris.

And so I was a month or two months into my break and my friend had invited me to join her and I remember that she said to me, she knew that I wasn't drinking at that point. She said, "I mean, you're going to make an exception, right? I mean, it's Paris. We're talking about Paris here."

And I remember saying, "Nope, I'm good, I'm not going to be drinking." And you know what, I didn't necessarily feel good about it. I was pretty nervous, but I wanted to do this. I wanted to go to Paris. I didn't want to isolate, I didn't want to stay at home, I didn't want to do what I had done in the past, which is be successful by just hiding out because you know what, I was never successful that way.

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And this was my first time going to Europe and not drinking. And so I was nervous but I was really committed, and I did all the things with them. All the dinners, all the nights out, they were drinking, I wasn't, and it was such a good and powerful lesson for me.

Because my brain wanted me to believe you simply cannot enjoy Paris, you simply cannot have a good time if you're not drinking wine. But you know what, my brain was wrong, and I wasn't able to discover that until I challenged myself to go on that trip.

So when someone asks you if being on a break from drinking means you're never going to wine country again, just tell them the truth. Whatever it is for you right now, and it can be anything. Tell them, "I don't know," or tell them, "You know what, I love wine country and I'm not going to stop going but I'm not going to be drinking." Or tell them, "You know what, that's not really my jam right now. It's not what I want to do and I'm good with that."

But the question is what do you want to do? Instead of trying to find the right answer for them, what do you want to do? Here's what I would do. I would go and I would practice the think-feel-act cycle and I would practice allowing urges like it is nobody's business.

Visiting wineries and not drinking is like lifting heavy weights. As long as you are allowing urges, you're looking at your mind, you're observing the think-feel-act cycle and you're not just gritting your teeth and using willpower and thinking like, "I hate this, I hate this, I just got to get through this, when will it be done?"

If you do that the right way, you will meet all of your thoughts. You will really understand what is creating your desire. You will really understand what is driving the habit, and it will be the best workout you can do. So I mean, I say go do it. I always encourage people to do the hard things because it's like my going to Paris for that weekend.

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My brain was like, "Rachel, you cannot do this, this is going to be terrible, you're going to be miserable." But in fact, it was the perfect opportunity for me to see the habit at work.

So the third comment that you sent in, "The only experience I have with alcoholism is my stepmother." So when people say stuff like this to me and you know, I've had my fair share with this as well, the place to go is not their mind but your mind. That's where you need to look.

What are you making a comment like that mean about you? My guess is this; you are probably making it mean that person thinks I have a problem. And if you are like most people who find themselves drinking more than they want and not understanding why it is, not understanding why it's difficult to control, not understanding why it happens and why other people don't seem to struggle as much, that idea of having a problem is probably kind of scary.

But let's understand why it's scary. I'll tell you for me, it was scary because I was really convinced that I was broken. I was really convinced long before drinking became a problem for me, I was really convinced that something was wrong with me, with a lot of things in my life.

Why couldn't I figure out what to do with my life? Why was I always starting projects and never finishing them? Why was I never happy in my romantic relationships? Why did I feel like such a fraud all the time? And of course, why did I sometimes drink too much?

Culturally, how we talk about overdrinking is framed in this way of, oh, if you drink more than you want it's because your brain can't handle alcohol. Something is wrong with your brain. Normal brains can handle alcohol. Yours can't. Now, you know I don't agree with any of this, and in fact, more and more we are finding evidence that this is not what is going on at all.

It's not about this brain can handle alcohol and your brain can't. It's not about the idea that this brain has a disease and that's why it's not able to drink. No. What's going on is what people are learning when they drink.

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I talk about this in my book, *Why Can't I Drink like Everyone Else*, I talk about the different models that are used to explain the habit of overdrinking, and one of the most common ones is this disease model. And the disease model basically says that people who drink too much have a disease. They have an illness that makes it so their brain doesn't properly function and alcohol renders them powerless.

Now, here's what I want you to know. Your brain is functioning exactly the way it should. It is seeking out rewards. The human brain was designed to seek out rewards in the environment. Rewards were an incredibly important part of human survival.

The problem is not seeking out rewards. The problem is that you don't have the skills yet to manage this desire and to change this desire. And no one has taught you. No one has ever given you any information about this, about how to manage highly concentrated rewards or rewards in general.

And I know some of you are probably thinking, "Okay, but why can some people drink and they don't have a problem and I'm struggling? It must be because something's wrong with me." Listen, different people learn different things when they drink. They have different thoughts in response to alcohol, in response to intoxication.

And this is why I think the disease model doesn't make sense. What we really need a model of a learning model, that people who find themselves overdrinking have a habit not only that they can change but it's a habit that they unconsciously taught their brain. They taught their brain to use alcohol as a coping mechanism to deal with how they were feeling, to deal with the desire for more, to deal with anxiety or insecurity or stress or sadness or grief or anger.

It's a coping mechanism, and without information on how habits work and without information on how to cope differently, the efforts that you make to change will be totally frustrating and it's why so many people find themselves ping-ponging back and forth between overdrinking,

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overdrinking, overspending instead of actually understanding how to cope differently. We just change into different habits of overdoing it.

So here's the thing; if your brain learned that the way to take the edge off of anxiety was by pouring a drink, then you have to teach it another way to deal. If your brain learned that the way to deal with desire is to say yes, is to answer that desire with more, then you're going to have to teach your brain a different way to respond and react to desire.

So when someone says, "The only experience I have with alcoholism is my stepmother," finding the right response here is totally the wrong approach. The right response is for you to pinpoint how you feel when someone says that and find the thoughts creating that feeling for you.

What are you thinking? You don't need to explain the think-feel-act cycle to her, you don't need to explain that alcohol is neural, you don't need to explain that the disease model of drinking is wrong. Don't waste your time educating others, thinking that then you'll feel better. The only way to make yourself feel better and to feel more confident in the decision to take a break is by explaining the think-feel-act cycle to yourself and understanding how it is unfolding in your own mind.

So the last comment, and this is one of my favorites. "I don't trust people who don't drink." Now listen, this is one of my favorites because I used to say this. Outwardly, I was really very vocal that drinking was amazing and fun and who the hell wouldn't want to do this, they must be pretty boring, there must be something that's just not quite right, might not be able to trust that person.

I was pretty self-righteous. God, that person doesn't drink? Boring. But all the judgment that I had, all of my self-righteousness was hiding the fact that I had all this judgment and shame. I was steeped in shame about myself because I couldn't understand why it seemed like I needed a drink in certain situations more than other people and why I sometimes I overdid it.

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I didn't know how to have a good time without a drink in my hand. I didn't know how to meet people or feel confident, or let go of my insecurities. I didn't know how to dance at a wedding or in public without a drink in my hand. I didn't know how to go on a first date, I didn't know how to go to a party. I didn't know how to manage a networking event.

It was just so much easier for me to pass judgment on other people who weren't drinking and decide oh, they're not fun, I can't trust them, they're boring. It was so much easier for me to do that than it was for me to turn and look inwardly, because inwardly, I was just steeped in all this shame.

I talk about this in episode 86 of the podcast. It's called The Mirror Effect, and it's basically the brain's tendency to judge other people harshly, which essentially is a misguided and misdirected attempt to feel better. It's totally unconscious. I didn't know I was doing it at the time. You probably don't know that you're doing it if you notice yourself being really self-righteous in certain areas.

But I was doing it just as an attempt to distract yourself from your own perceived deficiencies so that you can feel better. It's a little bit like that scene in the Wizard of Oz when Toto runs over and pulls the curtain back and the wizard is actually behind the curtain. And he says, "Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain."

That's what is happening here. So I want you to consider that self-righteousness is just a form of fear. When people say, "I don't trust people who don't drink," it's all about them. It's all about what's going on inside of them. And I know this because when I said that, it was all about what was going on inside of me.

It's an attempt to divert attention elsewhere. Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain. That's what's going on. Now listen, you don't have to judge them or hate them or be annoyed at them or explain anything to them. Just have compassion, and this is true for anything. It's not just around drinking.

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Whenever you see someone really, really stuck in feeling and being self-righteous, it's just a form of fear. So when you feel confident about your choices, the thing is you really have no interest in judging what other people do. You have no interest in concerning yourself with whether or not they drink or don't drink.

So that's really all you need to know. When someone makes a comment like that, it's the mirror effect going on. Just know that and be compassionate for it because you know what, we all have some version of this. We all have areas. I continue to work on this with myself.

When I notice my brain ever becoming really self-righteous about something, it's always a sign for me to look inwardly. When you take a break from drinking, dealing with other people, figuring out how to handle their comments, this is your work. This is how you really unwind the habit.

Hiding at home may help you get days under your belt, but it will not help you sustainably change the thoughts that are driving the decision to drink. This work will help you discover what is getting in the way of feeling 100% confident about your decision no matter what anyone says or does.

So right now, everything that your brother and your boyfriend and your closest friends are saying, it's all perfect for you. It's beautiful. It's going to help you. You can use these moments as a springboard to understand yourself, understand the habit, understand the think-feel-act cycle, understand your thoughts on a deeper level so that you can change them.

You don't need to explain the think-feel-act cycle to anyone, you don't need to educate them, you don't need to tell them that alcohol is neutral. You just need to use these moments as an opportunity to look into your own mind.

Thank you so much for sending this question in. I know it's going to help so many people and I just want to say you've got this. Alright, if you have questions and you want to hear me answer them on the podcast, all you need to do is send an email to podcast@rachelhart.com. That's everything for today and I will see you guys next week.

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Hey guys, if you're finding this podcast helpful, and I really hope you are, I would love if you would head on over to iTunes and leave a review. And as a special thank you, I've updated and expanded my free urge meditation giveaway. I've created two audio meditations plus a brand-new workbook that will teach you a different way to respond to the urge to drink.

The meditations are super simple. All it takes is five minutes and a pair of headphones, and each one now comes with a follow up exercise in the workbook to help you dig deeper and really retrain your brain when it comes to the habit of drinking. So after you leave a review on iTunes, all you need to do is head on over to rachelhart.com/urge, input your information, and I'll make sure you get a copy of both meditations plus the workbook in your inbox.

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.