

Ep #307: Personality as a Predictor of Overdrinking



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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 307.

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.

All right, everyone, welcome back. Today, we are going to talk about marshmallows. We're going to talk about the marshmallow test today, and how it connects to drinking. And by the way, if you're listening, and you're like, "Oh, I know what the marshmallow test is, and I definitely would have failed." Don't worry, keep listening. For all of you who are like, "What is she talking about?" I will explain.

So, there's a pretty famous study that has, you know, in some different versions, been around since the 1960s. Which, basically, the idea was researchers put young kids, around the age of four or five, in a room. Put them in front of a marshmallow and said, "Listen, you can eat the marshmallow now. Or, if you wait until I come back to the room, you can have two marshmallows."

The idea here was, let's see if we can test a child's innate ability to delay gratification and use self-control, and access discipline. And then, the researchers wanted to follow up with the kids years later; how were they doing? How are they doing academically? Financially? Do they have weight issues? Did they have mental health problems that they struggle with? Addiction? Right?

The idea was, gosh, if a four-year-old struggles with the marshmallow test, if they have a hard time delaying gratification, or accessing self-control and discipline, then it's not a good sign for their future. It felt a little bit like, if you

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fail the marshmallow test, you're kind of doomed. You're gonna struggle with a lifetime of underachievement.

So, the reason why I'm talking about this test today, is because there's so much focus on discipline and self-control when it comes to changing, changing our drinking. "I just need to be more disciplined." I hear that all the time. And we also have this idea that discipline and self-control, not only are they the keys to change and future success, right, I think that's been pretty widely adopted.

But we also have this belief that discipline, and self-control are an inborn trait, some four-year old's really good at waiting, other four-year old's not so much. And so, people will say this to me all the time when they start doing the work inside *Take a Break*, they'll say, "I just need to be more disciplined." And they're really certain that that is the solution.

Yet, here's the problem. At the same time, they often deeply believe that they are someone who lacks discipline, who lacks self-control, who lacks the ability to delay gratification. And, this is a terrible bind to be in. I'm very familiar with it. I felt like I was in this bind for the longest time, as well. So, you end up kind of citing your inborn traits, citing your personality, as the reason why you're struggling to say no. Or, the reason why you have a hard time reining yourself in, and it feels kind of impossible to change.

Now, don't get me wrong. When I ask people, "Okay, so why is it? What is your hypothesis for why you, right now in life, are drinking more than you want?" I do hear a lot, "You know, it's work stress. It's where I live. It's my friends. It's my partner. It's everything that's happening in my life."

I do hear that a lot, and I remember thinking that, as well. Thinking like, "Yeah, I mean, my job is crazy. I just want to blow off steam come Friday. By the way, I'm single, and I'm living in New York. Like, what do you want

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me to do? Like, what am I supposed to do when I actually have time to have fun?" And so, I had those explanations, as well.

But fundamentally, when you kind of really boil down to what I thought was going on, I would cite who I was. I would cite my personality. And that's what I hear from so many people. I'm just someone who... "I'm just someone who loves to drink, and I always have. I'm just someone who has a hard time stopping once I start. I'm just someone who's bad at not giving into temptation."

Now, my version, and you've probably heard this on the podcast before was, "I'm just someone who's missing an off switch." So often, we attribute our drinking and how much we drink, to who we are as a person. It's part of how we see and understand ourselves. It's part of our personality. And let me tell you, that is a trap that is going to keep you stuck. That, I know a lot of you fall into.

So, I think, before I want to help you kind of understand why it's a problem, I do want to just reinforce why so many people are stuck in this trap. Culturally, most of us, the vast majority of us have been raised to believe and taught to view someone's drinking as part of who they are. This happens with how we label people. Oh, he's a normal drinker. She's an alcoholic. We're swimming in this messaging; labeling people as the problem.

When we put this label; oh, they're normal, this person's an alcoholic. Those labels then suddenly, make the person the problem. And, you know, I will just say this, I will add, I think in some ways, the label was kind of meant to be a kindness. Like, "Oh, it's not your fault. It's just who you are."

But if you are someone who wants to change your relationship with alcohol, this label really can have the opposite effect. Because it's like, "Well, that's not who I want to be." And that can feel so disempowering, and

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demoralizing. Basically, it's like saying, "Well, I don't know. Like, I can't be changed, right?" This is who you are; this is who you'll always be.

And so, I think it's important for us to really understand, and pause for a second and consider like, yeah, it's no wonder so many people are afraid of having a problem with alcohol. That's what I hear a lot. "I'm just worried, do I have a problem? I want to know if I have a problem." I mean, it's really code for saying, "Am I an alcoholic?"

Now, we have this fear, because attached to that is, that's just who you are; it can't be helped. And then, who wants to be in that position? Most people don't. So, I think part of why we so often understand our drinking, and how much we drink, as this kind of inborn trait or part of our personality, it's part of this kind of cultural messaging.

But there's another reason why this happens. We're swimming in this messaging of labeling people, and seeing people as part of the problem. And you know, "It's not your fault, you just can't help it. It's just, you know, your brain is different." So, that's going on. And then, at the same time, think of all the evidence that you have built up over time.

So again, I used to think, "I don't know. I just, I just feel like I'm someone who's missing an off switch." This was not the result of getting drunk once. And, you know, not meaning to, because there were plenty of times where I got drunk where I meant to. This was not the result of one time eating to the point of feeling physically uncomfortable.

No, I had a mountain of evidence to support this belief. I had a mountain of evidence that supported, "Yeah, I think you're missing an off switch, Rachel." It seemed so true to me. Like, look at this mountain of evidence behind me. This is why I think this. And, I hated believing this about myself. I hated thinking that somehow, I was different. And, something was different with my brain. And, I was missing an off switch.

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I also clung to that as the truth. Why? Because to me, there was like no other explanation. For all the evidence that I had, I knew nothing about the think-feel-act cycle. I knew nothing about how habits formed the connection between our thoughts and our feelings, and then how we show up. I knew nothing about that.

So of course, I was like, “Yeah, well, I don't know. I think this is just kind of who I am.” The problem with attributing your drinking, or really any behavior that can feel compulsive. The problem with attributing it to part of your personality, is then, it's like, “Okay, well, what am I supposed to do? Right?”

“Like, what on earth am I supposed to do if this is just who I am? How am I ever going to change? Like, I'm just obviously a person who would have failed the marshmallow test.” I remember thinking that about myself. Like, “Yeah, but definitely you would not have been able to do that as a four-year-old.”

I was coaching someone just yesterday. I was coaching this woman inside the membership, and she was saying, “Yeah, I'm just someone who gives into temptation.” She was just presenting herself as like, this is who she is. She is just someone who gives into temptation. And she had lots and lots of evidence to support this. And I said, “Okay, let's look at the last time that you drank more than you wanted to. When you woke up the next day, why did you think that it happened?”

And she looked at me, she had this kind of like, quizzical look like, “What are you talking about, Rachel? I already told you. I'm just someone who gives into temptation.” Right? It's just she couldn't really understand what I was saying. I was like, “Okay, so, well, what did you say to yourself the next day?” Immediately she was like, “Oh, I told myself I should have known better.”

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So, I was like, “Okay, well, let's back up for a second. If this is who you are, if you're just someone who gives into temptation, then how on earth could you have known better?” These two things are at odds with each other. It's like saying to someone who has red/green color blindness, you know, saying like, “You should have known that you were filling your bag with red apples, when I told you to get green ones.” It doesn't make any sense.

But this is what people do all the time with drinking. They blame their drinking on kind of this inborn trait, a feature of who they are, because they're telling themselves, “I just love to drink. I just have a hard time stopping once I start. I'm just bad at not giving into temptation. I'm just someone who's missing an off switch.”

We explain away our drinking as, this is just part of who I am. And then, what do we do the next day? We wake up and tell ourselves, “Yeah, I should have known better.” But how? I want you to think about this. How could you have more discipline if you think your discipline is lacking? If it's an inborn trait that you just didn't get as much as, as other people?

I think this is where the real confusion comes in. Because the vast majority of people will hear me talk about this, and they're like, “Yeah, Rachel, that's how it works. Some people can't handle alcohol, they're alcoholics. It's not their fault. Their brain is different.” But the problem is that I think we have this entire explanation backwards.

I do think that many, many people see their drinking and how much they drink as part of who they are, and believe that they should know better, which makes no sense. I was doing it, too. I was constantly telling myself, “I think I'm missing an off switch.” And I would wake up the next day, beating myself up because I should have learned my lesson, by now.

So, I think that this is happening, right? We're attributing someone's drinking as a feature of their personality. Kind of like, you know, just who

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they are; it's an outcome. The reason why we do this is we're very quick, culturally, to label people and make the person the problem. But that, to me, is the real problem. And it creates the bind that so many people find themselves in.

“I want to change. But I'm not really sure that I can, because look at all this evidence. And by the way, when I look at all this evidence, it must mean that something is wrong with me. That some part of me is defective. But I don't want to be defective because who wants to be defective? So, okay, I just need to learn how to be more disciplined, and learn from my mistakes. But by the way, I don't think that I'm a disciplined person.”

Do you see the problem here? This is not a fun place to be stuck. And not only that, it's just not representative of what is going on. I want you to consider that instead of labeling people as like, “This is the normal drinker and this is an alcoholic, and it's just who you are.” Instead of seeing it as this kind of feature of our personality, or this inborn trait, to step back and start to see drinking as an action.

Okay, it's an action that your brain learns over time; it doesn't just happen. It's connected to what you're thinking and how you're feeling. Which, by the way, a lot of that is totally unconscious to you; you're very blind to it. So, all you see is the action part.

Your brain learns this behavior over time. Even if you are someone who got drunk the very first time you tried alcohol, it's still something your brain had to learn to do, learn to crave, learn to desire. And yes, there are many factors that I believe can influence our behaviors. And beyond just our thoughts and our feelings, of course.

Do some people have a more sensitive reward center in their brain? Sure. Do some people have different baselines for discipline and self-control, and delayed gratification? Sure. Does the environment in which you grew up,

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and what you witnessed around you, and how you witnessed adults around you, how you witnessed their drinking, and how they used alcohol, does that play a role? Sure.

Also, all of the messaging that we're exposed to, all of those cultural messages that we're getting all the time, I mean, just think about it. Every time I'm watching, you know, something on Netflix with my husband or another TV show, I just always kind of laugh. It's like, "Oh, here we go, again. Here's the storyline about the alcoholic."

Yes, all of this can play a role. But I just want you to consider for a second, that your relationship with alcohol is not something written in stone. It is not like color blindness. It's not something you have. It's something you created, you developed, you learned.

We learn to acquire the taste. We learn to use a drink to relax. We learn to use a drink to mark that the day is over, or it's Friday, or it's time to celebrate. We learn to use it trying to have fun, to open up to deal with our anxiety, to be bolder when meeting new people. We learn to associate it with sports and romance and vacation.

We learn to associate all this meaning to what it means to be someone who drinks, and drinks too much, or doesn't drink at all. And, what it means about the person. All of that is happening in the background. Your relationship with alcohol didn't just happen because of who you are. It happened because of what your brain was learning all along the way.

"Oh, this is how I relax. Oh, this is how I open up. This is how I have fun. This is how I stopped thinking about work. This is how I treat myself to something fancy." This really is one of the most important distinctions to make. To shift from, "I don't know, I'm just someone who..." to start to tell yourself, "I learned to drink this way. I taught myself to drink this way."

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Not as a way to beat yourself up, as a way to start to open up to curiosity. I wonder why? I wonder why I learned this? I wonder what it's connected to? I wonder why saying no to the urge for more, I wonder why that feels uncomfortable? I wonder why turning down a drink that someone offers me makes me feel awkward? I wonder why the idea of going to a wedding and not drinking seems like, well, why bother going?

I mean, you can just go on and on and on with the areas that you can be curious about. And you know what? The answer is always a thought. It's not who you are. It's not part of your personality. It's an unconscious thought that you have practiced over and over again, unknowingly. And that thought is the basis for your relationship with alcohol. Is the basis for why right now, you're struggling to say no. Or, why it feels terrible to you not to answer the urge or the craving or the desire to have more.

But the good news is that when you start to get curious, when you stop making it a feature of who you are, an inborn trait, then you can start to have a path to change. Because you can always start to shift your thoughts. You can always start to identify the think-feel-act cycle that is contributing to saying yes, or making it difficult to say no.

And when you see that it's just a sentence, you can change a sentence. You can edit a sentence. You do that all the time. It's not only the truth of what's going on, but it's just so much more empowering and so much more hopeful. Instead of being like, "I don't know, I just got to fix my brain. Fix my personality." That's not what you need to do, at all.

By the way, as I was doing research for this the marshmallow test, you know, they've been doing a lot of follow up studies. Turns out, it's not so predictive, after all. So, if you're someone out there who's like, "I definitely would have failed that." It's okay. Don't worry about it.

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Because when you start to just understand the think-feel-act cycle, and get curious about, “Why is it hard for me to delay gratification? What's going on here?” And you find that sentence and you find that feeling, all of a sudden it doesn't really matter your inborn level of discipline or self-control.

Because you start to see, “Yeah, this might be my baseline, but I have the key for changing it. I have the key to start to shift how I show up. And I don't have to change anything about who I am, or my personality, in order to do it.”

Alright, that's it for today. I will see you all next week.

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 empowered to take it or leave it. Head on over to www.RachelHart.com/join and start your transformation today.

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