

## Ep #342: Subtle Comments



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Rachel Hart**

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## Ep #342: Subtle Comments

You are listening to the *Take a Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, Episode 342.

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.

Alright, everybody, we're going to talk today about when people make comments about your drinking. It comes up so much with everyone that I work with. It came up a lot in my own journey. I'm not talking about comments that people make where they say, "Oh, I don't know, I think you might have a problem. I'm worried about you. You need to get help."

I'm talking about more subtle comments. Comments, like, "Oh, you're having another, huh? So, you're a big drinker. You sure like your wine." These kinds of subtle comments that are both kind of annoying, and can leave you feeling maybe a little icky or embarrassed.

What we're going to do today, is really unpack how to use these comments, these subtle little comments that people might make about your drinking, how to use it to your advantage. So, instead of getting angry or defensive, or feeling embarrassed or judged, and trust me, I have a lot of experience with all of that, we can actually use these moments to get to a more productive place.

I'm not talking about agreeing with other people's opinions or their assessment on your relationship with alcohol. I'm talking about really using these moments to help you understand how the habit works, and how to create change.

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I've been thinking about this recently, a lot, because this is something I dealt with a lot myself. And I will tell you, I went about it the wrong way. In these moments, I would get really defensive. I would really dig in my heels and kind of shut down. And the more that I work with people, the more I've been thinking about, not only why this matters so much, but why you need to have a different approach.

Because, certainly, getting defensive, digging in your heels, shutting down, it's not going to get you any closer to your ultimate goal, which is changing your relationship with alcohol. I do want to acknowledge this, if you're already in a position with maybe not feeling totally comfortable about how much you're drinking, or maybe struggling to cut back or struggling to stop, it can be really painful when people make these kinds of subtle comments, that might seem like a throwaway comment to them.

“Oh, you're having another? You really like to drink, huh?” But in that moment, it may not feel anything like a throwaway comment to you. It can feel like you're totally exposed, and that's awful. It is awful when you're in this place of having this worry and anxiety maybe, or trying to change and being unsuccessful and not getting why. Why is this hard for me? Feeling exposed in this moment, I know how that can feel.

I also know how it can lead to shutting down, and that's what I want to help all of you avoid. So, I want to tell you a story. I was telling it recently to some other people and they were like, “Why haven't you talked about this on the podcast?” I realized, well, I should. So, this story, I hope will kind of illustrate what can happen and what not to do.

Back when I was living in New York City, I briefly dated a guy who was living in Maine. For the purposes of this story, we're going to call him Tad; that was not his name. But I remember that is what my boss nicknamed him at the time, because he kind of looked like what maybe you imagine someone named Tad would look like.

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He was kind of preppy and handsome and just an upstanding guy. He was totally lovely and sweet. But we were not on the same page when it came to drinking. We had met when he was visiting New York. He lived in this tiny town in Maine, and we hit it off. We stayed in touch, and we ended up going on a couple of dates. He would sometimes come to New York, and I would sometimes go to Maine.

One of the times, in fact the last time that he was in New York visiting me, he made the fatal mistake of commenting about my drinking. After that weekend, I never saw him again. He was in town; we had been together all weekend. We were having dinner, and I ordered what was my third beer at dinner. This was totally normal for me. Right?

I would get a drink while I was waiting for my food to come and then I would have another while I was eating and then I'd have one towards the end of my meal, when I had finished eating. I will admit, we had probably had a boozy brunch as well, because it was the weekend and that was something that I was fond of doing. I had probably already, that day, had a couple mimosas or two at brunch. But this was totally normal for me.

It turns out that Tad was not much of a drinker. I think this is an easy thing that sometimes we get kind of fooled with when you may find yourself drinking a lot. We met out at a bar. I was drinking a lot that night. It's kind of easy to assume that the other people there, I mean, we're all in a bar, everybody's drinking a lot, too. But no, that's not always the case.

It was not really the case with him. I actually never really saw him get drunk. He would drink but not a lot, at least not when I was with him. Anyway, he's in town, we're at dinner, we finished our meal, the waitress comes over to get our plates, I ordered my third beer, and after the waitress left, Tad looks at me and he goes, "So, you really like to drink, huh?"

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In that moment, he might as well have said, “I think that you have a problem. And maybe you're an alcoholic.” Because that is exactly how I took it. His words, those words, “So, you really like to drink, huh?” Which by the way, back then I would have told you as much. I would have said “I love to drink. It's fun. It's what I like to do.” But hearing those words from him, it really caught me completely off guard.

I remember sitting there, and I will tell you this, because this tends to happen when you have these moments where a lot of shame bubbles up. It's like your brain will kind of memorize everything that was happening. I remember where we were, I remember the restaurant, I remember where we're sitting, I remember the entire scene. I can completely put myself back in that moment.

Sitting there, I felt so exposed. I felt like I was just being completely called out for my drinking. Because, at this point in my life, I was aware that I was drinking a little too much. But I didn't really like thinking about it. I didn't really like to acknowledge it. Because there were so many complicated emotions that came up the moment that I started to think about it.

And so, what I would always just kind of say is, “Yeah, okay. I mean, I like to drink. But, you know, I'm young, I'm in New York, and I work really hard. I just like to go out and have fun and blow off steam. Who doesn't?” But if I had really been honest with myself in that moment, about my relationship with alcohol... Which usually only happened after waking up and having a terrible hangover, and maybe not totally remembering the night before.

Only in those moments would I usually be honest with myself. But when I would think about my relationship with alcohol, it would make me feel kind of queasy because I didn't understand why I liked it so much. I didn't understand why it was hard for me to say no. Why I always wanted more, or thought more was better. Why other friends that also would drink a lot

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and also go out and party with me, they seemed to have some sort of off switch that I just didn't have.

I didn't understand. "Okay, everybody gets a little sloppy sometimes, but I seem to get sloppier more than other people." Truly, back then, what is now the title of my book *Why Can't I Drink Like Everyone Else?*, that truly was a question that plagued me. I really did believe deep down, in the moments when I actually would acknowledge it, I really did believe 'oh, God, is there something wrong with me? Why is it so easy for these other people, and so difficult for me?

And so, sitting there, when he made that kind of innocent comment, that shame that immediately kind of bubbled up just turned right into anger. Because it's so much easier, at least it's always been easier for me, to be angry at someone rather than to allow myself to feel embarrassed or feel ashamed.

That's something I've recognized, how anger has been a defensive mechanism for me in my life. I got angry. I didn't start yelling at him. I didn't tell him to mind this business. I don't even think I revealed at all... My response was probably, "Oh, you think so?" But inside, inside, I was more than angry. I think you could say I was outraged. I was still calm and smiling and being very polite, and inside I was like, "Okay, who do you think you are, Mr. Country Bumpkin from Backwater Maine?"

P.S. I love Maine. So, sorry, guys. But I was so mad at the moment. "You think I drink too much? This is New York, people drink. Three beers are not crazy. Why are you being such a prude? Why are you policing how much I'm drinking?" I mean, the level of anger that I had in this moment. I remember really thinking, "F.U.! P.S. You think this is a lot? This is not a lot. I'll show you what a lot looks like."

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This poor guy, he had no idea what he had walked into. But in that moment, after he made that comment, I just wrote him off. I was just like, nope, go get back on your plan. Go back to Maine. That's that. It was such an intense, crazy reaction, but that's kind of the point. Right?

When people make these kinds of subtle comments, you have this really big emotional response. You feel like something is triggered inside of you, that really feels disproportionate to what they're saying. Maybe they're just saying, "Oh, you're having another? Oh, you really like your wine." That is something to pay attention to.

I'm not saying we need to pay attention because they're right, because they know something, they see something that you don't see. I'm not saying that. I'm just saying this is a moment to pay attention to because there is something inside of you that may help to get a little curious with.

Now, back then I did not pay attention, right? I wrote this guy off. I joked about it with my friends, how he was just too uptight and didn't know how to have a good time. This poor guy, he really was a really sweet, nice guy. But I felt so much shame about my drinking. I felt shame about feeling different from other people who had more control.

I felt shame that I couldn't always keep my commitment. I would go out and I would say, "I'm going to take it easy tonight." And sometimes I would, and sometimes I wouldn't. I felt shame sometimes that I would get sloppy and embarrass myself. And most of all, I felt a lot of shame with, "Why is this so hard for me?"

I will tell you I was coaching someone yesterday inside the membership. One of the things that she was saying, "This would just be so much easier if I didn't have to deal with other people. If everybody just kept their opinions to themselves." One of the things that she was saying, was, "Well, I feel bad when someone has an opinion about how much I'm drinking. And then

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I feel bad when I think I'm disappointing people, when I say no to having a drink. Other people are just making it so hard.”

And it really can truly feel like that. I know, it felt like that for me for a long time. It's really kind of a common refrain that I hear. What I think ends up happening, which I have talked about on the podcast before, sometimes you can end up having this kind of fantasy of, ‘I could just figure this all out, or it would all be so much easier, if I could just be on my own.’

For me, I thought I could just move to a cabin in the woods, be by myself, and I would figure this all out. Life wouldn't be so hard. I have this kind of, I don't know, Henry David Thoreau, go live in the woods at Walden Pond and escape real life, and then it would be so much better. Except that's the piece where we have it all backwards.

This is the thing that I want to help all of you understand, because I didn't understand this for the longest time. You don't need to escape real life. You need to actually use it to help you understand how the habit's working. We don't need to escape other people and their opinions. We don't need to escape temptation.

We can use all of these things to unlock what's going on inside of us. In my story, back with Tad, imagine if I had just paused and been curious for a second, just a split second. To have a little bit of curiosity like, “Hey, why is this so upsetting for you? Why are you getting so defensive and having all this anger? Why did this create such a strong reaction?”

Because the truth was, I had this strong reaction because I had a lot of anxiety about my drinking. And who wants to look at anxiety? No one. No one wants to look at their anxiety. Except, trying to push it away and pretend it's not there, that wasn't working well for me either. My drinking wasn't getting better by not acknowledging the worries that I had about it.

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So, one of the things that I talk about a lot is this idea of quiet intuition. I think I hear this over and over and over again, with like thousands of people saying, “You know, there's this little part of me, this little, quiet part of me that's like, something doesn't feel right about my drinking. Something feels off.”

The question is, how do we actually acknowledge that quiet intuition instead of shutting it down? How do we learn how to follow it? So, instead of being defensive in these moments, when people make these subtle comments, what I want to offer to you are three questions that you can use. They're just questions that you use with yourself.

Now, this is something you can use moving forward. It's something if you've had a moment like this yourself in the past, you can also use it. You can maybe think back and answer these questions retroactively. But asking these questions is really that way of following this intuition that so many people have, but they're afraid of what will happen if they acknowledge it.

So, the first question is: What's beneath my defensiveness? Maybe it's shame. Maybe you feel like if you have a problem with your drinking, it means that something's wrong with you. Maybe it's fear, right? The idea that okay, well, what does this mean? If I am struggling to say no, do I have to stop drinking forever? If I have to stop drinking forever does that mean that I'm just always going to be on the outside of life looking in?

Maybe it's the worry... If drinking is a big part of your social life or your friendships or your relationship, and so, part of you is like, okay, well, if it's such a big part of my life right now, what's going to happen if I try to change? It can be really, really helpful to just ask yourself: Hey, what's beneath my defensiveness?

Because when you start to get these answers, it starts to show you some of the associations your brain has made with alcohol, right? Associations like

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this is the thing that proves that I'm normal. Or this is how I access the fun version of me. This is how I connect with people. This is how I unwind. Whatever it looks like for you. But knowing what those associations are for you it's always hugely helpful.

The second question you can ask yourself is: Why do I think saying no is hard for me? Now, again, if you had asked me back then that question, I would have given you a whole litany of answers that sounded like, "I don't know, I just like to drink a lot. I'm an all-or-nothing person. It's not alcohol, it's just I think more is better when it comes to pretty much everything."

I may have also told you, "Yeah, I'm just surrounded by temptation. I live in New York City, and I'm single, and..." I had a lot of explanations. And even though one of the things that we do here is kind of unpack how these explanations are actually getting in the way, it's really helpful and important and necessary for you to see what they are. For you to understand what your knee-jerk explanation is for why it's hard for you to say no.

Now, ultimately, we have to do the work to dismantle those thoughts. But we can't dismantle the things that we don't know are there.

Finally, the third question is: What do you want your relationship with alcohol to look like? A lot of times, what we do, is we get in the position of just articulating what we *don't want* our drinking to look like, right? "I don't want to do dumb stuff. I don't want it to be an everyday thing."

But it's so powerful to really articulate, okay, but what do you want? I truly think a big part of me back then would have been happy not drinking if I felt like I could get all the benefits without it. Which for me, back then, it was, "Well, that's obviously impossible, right? This is how I access the fun version of myself. This is what I do. This is how I relax. It's how I blow off steam. It's how I socialize."

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And so, really starting to say, “Well, truly, what I would want my relationship to look like, it would look like this. And recognizing, yeah, but I don't think some of those things are possible without it.” But just having the exercise of, what do I actually want? So, not just going to this place of quantity. What's the feeling that you're after? What would it be like to feel like you don't need it in certain situations? Or it wasn't weird to say no?

This can be an incredibly, incredibly powerful question. So, really thinking about it, these three questions. If you have this moment where someone makes a throwaway comment, but you have a really disproportionate reaction, you just ask yourself: What's underneath my defensiveness? Why is saying no hard? What do I actually want my relationship with alcohol to look like?

Those answers can reveal so much. You can use the subtle comments that people make to actually articulate something for yourself that we often don't think about or don't actually want to look at. That's not what I did, back in that situation with Tad. I got angry. I got defensive. I turned him into the problem, and I wrote him off.

And I shoved all the anxiety and worries and shame that I had, I just pushed them further down. Doing that meant that I was further away from the solution that I wanted. So, we can look back and, I don't know, think about whether or not he was right. I mean, I really did like to drink. But as I understand it now, not for the reasons that I thought.

All that shame that bubbled up inside of me when he made that comment, it wasn't because something was wrong with me. It was because I was living in a society where I was made to feel like drinking was just supposed to come naturally. Right?

You shouldn't need any guidance or any instruction. You shouldn't need any explanation about how to handle urges or excuses or need to know

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anything about your brain. Which, now I can see how ludicrous all of that is. But ultimately, that moment with him was a moment that I didn't know how to use to actually get closer to my goal and figure out my drinking. I only knew how to dig my heels in.

That's what I want to help all of you avoid by offering you these questions. Because the thing is, people are going to make comments sometimes, right? Sometimes, it's truly innocent. Sometimes, it's super judgmental. Sometimes the comments might come from a loving place, and a place of being worried about you. And sometimes it comes from a place of trying to feel better about their own drinking or feeling kind of superior.

These subtle comments, we spend so much time kind of being defensive, or trying to understand the implied meaning behind it, but what I want you to just think about is: How can I use this moment to my advantage? And the way to do that is to spend some time answering these three questions.

Alright, everybody, that's it for today. I will see you 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.

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