

Ep #344: The Problem With Focusing on the Health Risks of Drinking



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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 344.

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 everybody, we're talking today about the problems of focusing on the health risks of drinking and why I think this approach can backfire for so many people. Now, before I go any further, I know that some of you who are listening are like, listen, educating myself about the health risks of alcohol, it worked for me. When I read up on all the harms that alcohol does to my body, that was the thing that convinced me to stop.

And my approach with everything is, listen, if that works for you, great. But I've worked with thousands of people, and I will tell you there are a lot of people who have the opposite experience. They get stuck in the place of, okay, I know it's not great for me. Why do I keep giving in? Or maybe it works a while to kind of remind yourself, yeah, it's bad. It's poisoning my body. But then that desire starts to creep back in.

And I'll say this, a lot of people in my world of teaching people how to quit drinking or how to cut back, a lot of people really go heavy on the health risks of drinking. They talk about alcohol being an addictive poison. How it's bad for your brain and your liver and your heart, and it increases the risk of cancer.

And I'm not saying that we should close our eyes and ignore the science or pretend that alcohol consumption doesn't increase the risk of injury or certain diseases. What I'm saying is that focusing only on the impact of

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drinking when it comes to your health, it only tells one piece of the story. And when we try to use scare tactics to get people to change, which, face it, that's what most programs do. They rely on scare tactics and fear. That can backfire big time. It can have the opposite effect.

And what I want you to consider today, what I'm offering is let's just step back and look at the big picture because humanity has a complex relationship with alcohol and your individual relationship with alcohol is no less complex. There are benefits to your drinking and there are costs to your drinking. This is true for everyone, no matter how much you drink. No matter how much you want to change your drinking, there are always costs and benefits.

And I think what gets us into trouble, first, when we look at the benefits that we get from drinking, right, and some of those benefits, they're real. And when your brain starts to believe that those benefits are only possible through drinking, right? This is the only way that I feel at ease in social settings. This is the only way for me to relax at the end of the day. This is the only way for the fun version of me to come out. This is the only thing that helps with chronic pain or helps me fall asleep.

That's problem number one, telling ourselves that we can only get this benefit through drinking. Problem number two is when you start to have a lot of chatter about your drinking. So you're thinking about it more. You're thinking like, oh God, I can't wait until this day is over and I can just relax on the couch and have a drink. You might start worrying about the availability of alcohol.

I was coaching someone recently on this and they were talking about how they were going to visit their friends this summer. They were going to a cabin way out in the middle of nowhere. And she immediately started thinking like, okay, well, are they going to have wine? Do I need to bring wine? Are there liquor stores nearby? What's the plan here?

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I think a lot of times we assume that this type of chatter only happens when someone has a serious problem, but the truth is this sort of chatter can happen even with small amounts because your brain is expecting a reward. And it's like, I don't know, we're going to a cabin in the woods, what are we going to do? Are we getting the reward?

Problem number three is when your attempts to cut back aren't working. So maybe you notice an uptick. Maybe you're drinking a little bit more than you feel comfortable with, right? And you're like, okay, come Monday I'm going to be good. Things are going to be different. And then Monday rolls around and you're still drinking the same amount.

Or you go out with friends, and you tell yourself, I'm going to take it easy tonight. I can't even tell you the number of times that I did this. And then one turns into two and two turns into three and then it's like, I don't know what happened.

So the real problem, the real problem with all of this is that we have this internal knowing. We have this kind of quiet whisper inside of us that's like something doesn't feel right. Something feels off about my drinking. Maybe because I'm feeling like I need it. Maybe it's because I'm having all this chatter. Maybe because my attempts at change aren't working.

And that quiet intuition, when we have it, what we do is we go searching for answers. Usually in secret, right? We're not talking to our friends about this, we're going to Google, we're looking online. And that's where most people, that's where they first see a lot out there that is focused on the harms of drinking.

And right then and there, right then and there when all they're met with are the harms, I think that actually serves as a turnoff for so many people. You just start reading about all these harms and it's like, okay, well, yeah, but

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like what about in France? What about the studies that show it's actually heart healthy? What about the studies showing that some of the longest living people in the world drink alcohol?

I think what happens is we kind of run into our inner teenager who doesn't want to be lectured. And the moment that we start feeling like someone is lecturing us, what do you do? You tune out, you stop listening. So that can happen.

I think what can also happen for people is some of you might come across the harms and you get a little worried. You get that kind of little like, uh-oh feeling or that little jolt inside like, oh, God, maybe I didn't realize what this was really doing. And especially if you have a long history of using fear to motivate change in yourself, you might at first respond. You might find these harms, focusing on the harms to be useful.

So I know in particular I have tried to use fear and scare tactics and focusing on the harms to change so many things in my life. Not just with alcohol, but with smoking and sugar and drugs. It's just like scare tactics galore.

But here's the thing, no matter how hard I focused on the harms, eventually I got to a point where I was like, screw it, who cares? Let's live a little because the harms weren't taking into account the complex relationship that I had, the fact that it wasn't all downside, there were upsides to, to my drinking.

And so I finally discovered it was so much more helpful and powerful for me to position alcohol as neither good nor bad, right? To position it as neutral. It's not only downsides, but it's also not only upsides. It's not only unhealthy, but it's not only healthy either.

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It's complicated and those complications are why focusing on the health risks can backfire for some people, because what ends up happening is you end up dismissing part of your relationship with alcohol that is connected to the habit, that's connected to why it's difficult for you to say no.

And really, I mean, just think about it, right? If all it took was telling yourself that alcohol was poison, you would have solved it by now. Drinking wouldn't be an issue, your desire wouldn't be an issue. Fixating on the downsides ignores how the habit works. It ignores why you desire it. It ignores the associations that your brain has made with drinking and what it has learned through drinking it. And it also ignores the very human desire for pleasure and to feel good, and that's not a bad thing.

I think what happens that can lead you to this place of feeling sometimes when you're focusing on the harms and how it's so bad for you, it can lead to this place of feeling a little holier than thou when you say no, when you're not drinking. And I'm speaking from experience. I had that experience early on in my own journey of saying no to a drink, of turning it down and kind of having this internal conversation of like, look how healthy I'm being and look how sloppy these people are getting, right?

There was a point in my journey where I totally fell into this trap. I think it's very normal. But the problem is, when you're trying to boost yourself up, right, if when you're trying to make yourself feel good by comparing yourself negatively to others, it's always going to backfire because feeling good at somebody else's expense, it's a cover, right?

It's a cover for all the insecurity, right? I had so much insecurity about all the times that I was drinking and what people would make it mean, and what it meant about my brain and who I was. And all the fears I had about how people would judge me.

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And so focusing on how I was being so healthy, it was actually in many ways a defense mechanism for all this shame that I had. Shame that needed to be dealt with because there's no amount of focusing on how healthy you're being by not drinking that's going to undo these deeper fears and these worries, right, that's what it means to struggle with saying no.

And finally, and I think this is often the most overlooked part, is that when we really go deep on the health risks what can happen is it can increase people's shame. So remember how I said eventually I would get to a place of being like, screw it, let's just live a little, right? You only live once, let's have a drink.

The next day, because I had started from this place of it's bad and it's a poison and let's think about all the ways it's harming me, I would have even more shame because now I was questioning why am I doing something that I know, I have so much research and so much data, that it's bad for me and bad for my health?

That truly made me feel like something was wrong with me. It increased my shame and fear so much. It really made me feel like I was unable to change. When in reality what was happening was I was trying to address my drinking and my urges and my excuses and my desire from this very surface level.

I was trying to address it just by focusing on how much, just by focusing on quantity, trying to scare myself into not drinking alcohol. And I gave very little, almost no attention to what was actually beneath my desire and why it was hard for me to say no to my urges and what was unfolding in my brain.

And so the question then is, where does this leave you, right? If you're someone who has relied on using a lot of scare tactics, who might feel shame because you've done a deep dive into the research about the ways

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in which it can increase your risk for certain diseases. If you are in that place and you notice that you're trying to scare yourself into changing, just get curious.

Just ask yourself, in what ways is that helping? And in what ways is that not helping? That's all I want for you to do today, is just to have that conversation with yourself to start to understand that by focusing on the harms, you may be turning a blind eye to an important part of your relationship with alcohol. The upsides, the benefits, you need to understand that piece as well.

You can't just ignore that and pretend like it's not there. You don't need to scare yourself to change your relationship with alcohol. You don't need to scare yourself to stop drinking or to cut back or to drink mindfully. You don't need to use fear tactics. And, in fact, not using fear tactics can actually be the key to change. All right, 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.

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 RachelHart.com/join and start your transformation today.

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