

Ep #348: Drinking to Elevate the Situation



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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 348.

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 be talking about when the drink elevates your experience. I'm talking about this today because I really see it as one of the hardest challenges people face when they're trying to change the relationship with alcohol. They run kind of into these moments, whether it's birthdays, or anniversaries, or vacations or fancy dinners.

You may have a lot of good reasons to want to cut back or to stop drinking, but in these moments, that birthday is on the horizon, you're headed on vacation, you may find yourself returning to the same thought, "How am I going to celebrate without a drink?"

The fact of the matter is humans have used alcohol for thousands of years to mark special occasions. But sometimes it's not just a special occasion, right? It's that sense that pouring a drink just elevates what you're doing. So, I hear from a lot of people who will say, "Cooking dinner, it's nice, and I really enjoy cooking. But when I pour that glass of wine, the whole experience is elevated."

I've talked about this before on the podcast, how many people I have coached around watching the sunset, like sitting on their back porch and watching the sunset. They're like, "That's nice, but when I have a glass of wine and I'm watching the sunset, it's just so much better."

[Take a Break from Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #348: Drinking to Elevate the Situation

I will tell you it can seem silly to be upset about not doing a champagne toast. For the longest time I was in this kind of internal tug of war where on the one hand it seemed kind of silly to be really fixated on a champagne toast; “Okay, so you're not going to do the toast.” But on the other hand, it really felt kind of devastating. I remember having the sense of, it just feels weird, it doesn't feel celebratory. I feel kind of less adult. The moment, that moment of celebrating, really lost the specialness that I really wanted.

This is a place where I think we can get into a lot of trouble when we want to fixate and focus on the harms of alcohol as a way to change, right? So, kind of reminding yourself that it's bad for you and it's a poison, and you're going to feel really crappy tomorrow. I know that sometimes that can work. I've done some of that myself, right.

But I think what a lot of mainstream approaches really miss out on is this very normal, very natural, human desire for pleasure. Pleasure is important. Pleasure is not an add-on, it's not something that doesn't matter in your life. We have a human body, we are exquisitely sensitive, and we have all of these nerve endings to give us all of this sensory input from our environment.

The idea that we'll just use our sensitivity to avoid bad sensations and that good sensations don't matter, to me, that is not a life that I want to live. I want to have a lot of pleasure. I desire pleasure.

But what happens is, when we end up using a drink to elevate a situation, to make something more celebratory, more special, more pleasurable, we try, when we want to change the habit and change our relationship with alcohol, we try to talk ourselves out of needing this pleasure, right? Or we try to find pleasure in, “You're going to feel really good when you wake up tomorrow if you don't drink too much tonight.”

[Take a Break from Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #348: Drinking to Elevate the Situation

Sometimes, and I've been guilty of this myself, we try to generate pleasure by feeling superior because we aren't drinking. I remember doing this a lot. Kind of looking at people who had had a couple of drinks and trying to feel good about myself and generate pleasure because I was being so responsible and so good and so healthy, and I wasn't doing anything embarrassing.

But I think the one thing that we forget to do is of course, one of the simplest things. One of the things we forget to do is, hey, let me figure out how to find, generate, and create more pleasure in the moment on my own, not through consuming something, through the mind. Just through redirecting the brain. Through paying more attention to the things that we're really quick to gloss over.

I really do think that the goal here, for anyone who wants to change their relationship with alcohol, is not about quantity; it's not about a numbers game. It's about learning how to live a more pleasurable life, period. A healthier life, a more pleasurable life.

Listen, I'm not saying that pleasure can only come from very pure, virtuous sources of pleasure. I'm just saying, if you, like me, have been in moments where you feel like the drink is compulsory. Like that without it, it's just not going to be as good, it's not going to be a celebratory, it's not going to be as special. If in these moments sometimes you feel that when you say no, you're missing out, then the decision to drink feels a lot less like a decision and more like a necessity.

And when alcohol feels like a necessity, when it feels necessary, that's not so pleasurable. One of the things that I teach people inside *Take a Break*, is all about how to bring our full attention to the experience of drinking.

So, we have a course called The Mindful Drink. Not everyone chooses to do it, some people take a break and they decide they don't want to

[Take a Break from Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #348: Drinking to Elevate the Situation

reintroduce alcohol. Other people will take a 30-day break, and then they'll say, "You know what? I think I want to go a little bit longer." So, they might extend it for another 30, and another 30, or another 30. Right?

Others decide, "I do want to reintroduce it but I want to do it differently. I don't want it to be a numbers game. I really want to understand how to be very mindful of it."

So often, when people that I work with do this, and when I started doing this, what's really mind blowing is to compare the experience of your idea of what is pleasurable and what will be pleasurable, with your actual experience of pleasure. What happens when you slow down and pay attention.

Because when something is truly pleasurable, when you slow down and you pay attention, it should become more pleasurable. I'm going to say that again: When something is truly pleasurable, when you slow down and pay attention, it should become more pleasurable.

The question to consider, for you, is: Does that happen when you drink? When you slow down and you pay attention does it become more pleasurable? Often, people report, "I actually have a lot of pleasure in the lead up, like anticipating the drink. That's where I got the majority of my pleasure, imagining what it was going to be like. Maybe in those first couple sips there was pleasure. But then it just was like a steep drop off."

Other people will have the experience of having that first sip and being like, "I'm not really sure that I like this. I tell myself that I really like it, but now that I'm actually paying attention, I'm not entirely sure that I do." There's no right thing to discover. This is not an exercise with an objective that's like. "Wink, wink, see? It's not actually pleasurable."

[Take a Break from Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #348: Drinking to Elevate the Situation

The goal here is just for you to slow down and discover, hey, what's happening? What is my experience truly like? And you can take this out of the realm of alcohol, you can think about it with food, right? I have applied so much of the work that I teach in my relationship with food. I think about pizza.

For a long time, I would eat pizza in a way that actually diminished my pleasure, right? I would eat pizza to the point of feeling kind of gross and ill, which is not pleasurable. But it was weird, because I thought it was pleasurable. I thought having more was increasing my pleasure. I would have told you I love pizza. But eating to the point of feeling gross, that is not pleasure; that is compulsion.

I think sometimes what happens is we mistake compulsion, we mistake 'more is better,' for a pleasurable experience when the two things might have nothing in common. I think about my patterns with food; eating quickly eating a lot, and eating to the point of feeling really uncomfortable. But also, having a lot of desire and eating without really tasting or paying attention, eating while doing other things, and focusing on quantity.

All of those patterns carried over into my drinking. All of those patterns were really about, number one, not really knowing what to do with an urge other than obey it, right? It's like, "Well, the urge for more is there, so what else am I going to do? I've got to say yes, because saying no is awful."

Number two, I think the patterns were also about trying to regulate how I was feeling. I didn't know that I was doing this, but consuming a lot, consuming very quickly, getting myself to the point of feeling this fullness, it helped me disconnect from a negative emotion.

Then, in trying to change how I ate, I encountered many of the same issues with my drinking. I would feel disappointed when I would say no to myself. I would feel deprived, things would feel less enjoyable, or like I was missing

[Take a Break from Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #348: Drinking to Elevate the Situation

out if everyone at the table was having dessert and I wasn't. But only because I wasn't focused on maximizing pleasure in my life, I was focused on restricting. I was focused on saying no. I was focused on numbers.

I was focused on being good. And I will tell you, that idea of being good, it's always going to backfire. Because who wants to be good all the time? Right? When you're telling yourself over and over, "I'm being so good, I'm being so good," and that is your way for trying to cope with removing pleasure from your life, not figuring out new ways to create more pleasure, you're going to get to this point where it's like, "I don't want to be good anymore. Let's just be a little bad. Don't I deserve it?"

What I think we really need is a better understanding of the brain, a better understanding of pleasure. I talk about this all the time; your brain was designed to seek out rewards. The reward center is not the part of your brain having a logical debate about, is this reward good for us or is it bad for us? Which ones create long-term consequences, and which ones don't?

That's not for your reward center, that's a conversation happening in the higher brain. Your reward center is very focused on just one thing, let me find the reward and let me get the biggest reward possible. But reward and pleasure are not the same thing. Right?

It makes a lot of sense when you think about it like, "Okay, if we compare a grape versus wine, or wheat versus beer, or potato versus vodka, it's pretty clear which one produces the highest reward." But don't confuse reward with pleasure.

What's really happening, when you're thinking about birthdays and celebrations and fancy dinners and sunsets, and all of these moments, and feeling like, in the moment, saying no, it's like this loss. What's happening, is that you're face to face with the habit.

[Take a Break from Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #348: Drinking to Elevate the Situation

On the surface it will sound like, “Yeah, a drink just makes things more special, it elevates everything.” But what's really going on, is that your brain starts to believe that the only thing that's truly special in these moments is the drink. The only thing that's truly special is alcohol. And then, your brain becomes less able to find enjoyment and pleasure without it.

And so, change is so much more than saying no. Change is about recalibrating your brain. So, I don't want you to think about this as a loss of pleasure. I want you to think about a recalibration of pleasure. And understanding what is and is not truly pleasurable. Introducing yourself to a wider range of different types of pleasure that humans can experience.

Sometimes it is just in those first couple sips where you get 90% of your pleasure, and by going past that point over and over and over again, you end up burning out your brain so it really can't feel or take in other pleasures; they're so small in comparison and not able to register. But not only that, you are kind of confused about the difference between reward and pleasure.

This recalibration doesn't happen overnight, but I promise that it does happen, and it can happen so much more quickly than you might imagine. Especially when you start to know how to cultivate more pleasure, beyond the pleasure that we're constantly sold, right? The reward of ‘eat this, drink this, buy this, click here.’

You actually learn how to experience more and different kinds of pleasure by tuning into your body instead of just letting your reward center run the show. So, really think about this next time you are weighing whether or not to drink, and you hear that voice inside being like, “I don't know, but is it going to be special? If I say no, is the drink really about making your experience more special, or is your brain confused? It thinks that truly the only special thing is alcohol because it has confused the reward and the experience of pleasure?”

[Take a Break from Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #348: Drinking to Elevate the Situation

Alright, 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 www.RachelHart.com/join and start your transformation today.