

Ep #369: How to Move Past Shame



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Rachel Hart

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All right, everybody, listen, I had a little epiphany about shame the other day that I really want to share with all of you because there can be so much shame mixed up in the desire to drink and how much you drink and broken commitments and struggling to find a solution.

I will just tell you this. I know that I had a ton of shame around my drinking and what I have seen both in my own experience and in my years of working with so many people is that the shame that we feel most often comes up from the questions that we silently ask ourselves, " Why is it so hard for me to say no? Why can't I learn my lesson? Why do I have all these good reasons to cut back or to not drink and still I keep giving in? Why was I so stupid?"

These questions, they don't create the shame. They're just a jumping off point for our brain. The shame is created in the answer that the brain offers for these questions. Answers that sound like, " There's something wrong with me. Something about me is different. Something about my brain is different. I'm missing something that other people have. I'm broken."

Listen, I have spent a lot of time on the podcast breaking down how none of these things are true. That's not what's going on. There's nothing wrong with your brain. In fact, your brain truly is a marvel.

When you learn how to harness it, you will see that it is the thing that will help you change your relationship with alcohol. It's the thing that will help you figure out your drinking. The only problem is that no one ever taught you how to use it. But I'm not going to go into all of that today because what I want to talk about today is this epiphany that I had about shame.

It has to do with a thought error that so many people have. I have this thought error. for a very long time. Thought errors, they have a way of sounding so correct when you hear them. They sound so spot on and so

Ep #369: How to Move Past Shame

correct that you don't think to question the thought. In fact, you don't even think it's a thought.

You just think it's a fact. It's true. But if you dig inside the logic of this thought error, you will find a really important flaw. And that flaw I promise it's going to set you free from so much of the shame that you're experiencing. So often, what happens is we never really think to dig inside the logic of these statements because they just sound so perfectly logical.

So the thought error with shame is this. "If I could go back in time and change my behavior, I wouldn't feel the shame that I feel right now. If I could go back in time and not get so drunk, I wouldn't feel so embarrassed right now. If I could go back in time and not send that stupid text, I wouldn't be in a shame spiral right now. If I could go back to my twenties, And not have spent all this time drinking. I wouldn't have to deal with all the shame that I have right now from wasting all that time, wasting that period of my life." I mean, you know, fill it in with however your brain wants to offer this up to you, but you get the picture.

It sounds so logical. If I wouldn't have done the shameful thing, I wouldn't feel so ashamed right now. I mean, the logic is pretty sound. At least that's what I thought for a very long time. But here's the thing that I realized, shame doesn't work like this. Because shame is part of the human experience.

We feel happy. We feel sad. We feel afraid. We feel disgust. We feel anger. We feel desire. And you know what? We also feel ashamed sometimes. And just like we can't delete all these other emotions from our life, we can't just delete fear from our life. We also can't delete shame. It's just part of the package. If you are alive, you're going to have the experience of shame sometimes because you are human. If we take the idea that shame is part of the human experience, even if I could build you a time machine, right? Even if I could, you could go back in time, you could not drink so much, you didn't send that drunken text, you didn't waste so much time drinking, guess what? You'd still have shame about something because instead of

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

Ep #369: How to Move Past Shame

shame about your drinking, it would just be about something else. It would be about money or your family or your body or your sexual preferences or your accomplishments or lack thereof. Undoing how much you drank in the past and the things that you did while you were drinking would not inoculate you against shame.

You would feel shame in other areas of your life. When you struggle with your drinking. And by the way, because we are just surrounded by all these messages that people who struggle, you know, there's something different about them, different than other people. Yes. When you struggle with your drinking, you're going to have a higher proportion of shame around alcohol and your relationship with alcohol.

But some people have a higher proportion of shame around their body, or their sexual preference, or their relationships, or their money. We're all still experiencing shame. So believing this thought, "If I could go back in time and change my behavior, I wouldn't feel this shame right now." It's actually a trap. Because there's no deleting shame from your life. It's still coming.

Now, I can hear some of you thinking to yourself, "Okay, Rachel, fine! Everybody experiences shame. But the shame that I have about some of the things that I did while I was drinking or the choices that I made around alcohol versus the shame that somebody has about their body or money, it's just not the same thing."

We so want to believe that there's like this shame index, right? And that we can say, well, like this person's at a two, but I'm at a 10. But I will tell you this, it doesn't work that way. When you feel shame, your brain is not in the background running this algorithm that's like, "Hmm, well, okay, what Rachel did last night, that's about a 7.2 so I'm going to release this many neurotransmitters and this many hormones that correspond with a shame rating of 7.2."

No, right? When you feel shame, you're just in it. You're fully in it. In fact, shame can be so debilitating because when we're in a shame spiral, It's

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

Ep #369: How to Move Past Shame

very hard to put your situation into perspective. It feels like the end of the world. People in our lives might say to us, "Hey, you know what? It's not that big of a deal." But you're like, "Okay, it feels like a catastrophe."

So we're all going to feel shame. And when we're in a shame spiral, it's just going to feel awful no matter what. The idea that, you know, if I could go back in time, I wouldn't have to feel this shame. That's a trap. I understand that some of you might be listening to this episode thinking like, "Okay, so we can't escape shame. Great. This is a super uplifting episode." But here's the thing in a strange way when I had this epiphany, I found it so incredibly freeing. And I hope that some of you listening also are having this experience because for the longest time, I really couldn't shake so much of the shame that I had in my past. I really believed that I wouldn't have to feel this way if I could change things. And I think that that happens so often when people embark on changing their relationship with alcohol. It's like, "Oh God, if I can just change this and I won't have to feel the shame anymore."

But then I work with so many people. No matter how perfect they are. No matter how much either they're not over drinking or they're not drinking at all, the shame is still there. Because they're holding onto this thought error. Not only is it still there, but they're kind of waiting for the other shoe to drop. And that's a terrible place to be in. What I think is so debilitating about this thought error is because what you end up doing is setting up yourself to never feel any better. Because if the only solution is to go back in time and you can't do that and no amount of being perfect in the present or the future makes up for it, then you're just stuck.

But putting this new spin, what I'm offering you today, this new kind of framework or understanding about shame It can be wildly freeing because then it's like, "Okay, Rachel, you had a lot of shame about your drinking. Perhaps you had a higher proportion than other people."

But some people have a higher proportion in other areas of their life about their body or money or the relationship or their education. And even if you

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

Ep #369: How to Move Past Shame

think, "Well, those things aren't as bad as what I did." That's not how the brain works. There's no shame index. The brain isn't running calculations in the background to determine how much shame you should feel. When you feel shame, it just sucks. It feels awful no matter what it's about. So the idea that someone with body shame or money shame is having a more tolerable experience than the shame you have about your drinking is a lie.

Shame is shame is shame. If all of this is true, which I think it is, then the question that you're left with is not "How do I build a time machine?", not "How do I structure my life so I never make a mistake and I'm just perfect from here on out?" The question that you're left with is "How do I cope with this very human experience that everyone seems to have?"

If shame is coming either way, if you drink more than you want, or if you never touch alcohol, then how am I going to learn how to manage and see myself through and be resilient and find resilience in these moments? I will tell you this, having had my own recent shame attack about something completely different but I was in it, right?

It had nothing to do with alcohol, but I was just in the shame spiral. Coping for me, I realized meant being able to name what was going on, sharing with other people what was happening, noticing thought errors pop up, like, "Oh God, if only I hadn't done that, I would feel better."

Normalizing the experience and I'm not trying to numb over it, not drinking or eating or working so much that I couldn't feel the pain. Because of course, when we numb over it, we deny ourselves the ability to process the emotion. Coping was, "How do I learn how to allow this very normal emotion to be there, but not fall prey to it?"

The way that I was able to do that was having trust that my body can process emotions like this. Sure enough, I will tell you after about 24 hours and those 24 hours, they sucked. They really did. But I was doing all of these things and I watched it dissipate. When you watch something like that happen, it truly feels like magic.

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

Ep #369: How to Move Past Shame

Because for so long, I had this belief that there's nothing you can do except build a time machine. That's the only thing that would possibly fix it. Now, when you use all of these skills and then you have the memory of, "Yeah, you know what, when I do all of these things. It actually will go away." That's a memory that you get to tap into for the rest of your life. You remember it when the next thing happens, the next shame spiral, and you know, "Okay, this feels awful, but I'm going to be able to see myself through. I know what to do. I know how to name it. I know how to share. I know how to normalize. I know that numbing is not going to help. I'm able to spot all of these different thought errors, and eventually my body will be able to process this." That is the key, my friends.

The key is not, "How do I never make a mistake again? How do I figure out how to be perfect?" That is just going to set you up to be in a fear state all the time. It's not structuring your life so you never have to feel the emotion of shame. It's knowing exactly what to do when it shows up.

All right, that's it for today. I will see you next week.