

Ep #370: Tossing the Concept of "Being in Denial"



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With Your Host

Rachel Hart

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All right, everybody, today we're going to talk about denial and all the misconceptions about it. Just to be clear, before we go any further, I am not suggesting that any of you out there listening to this episode are in denial about your drinking. In fact, I want to suggest that the opposite is true. Nobody's in denial about their drinking. Society is in denial about how we go about helping people. In fact, the whole concept of denial and how we talk about it, is actually more harmful than how much you might be drinking right now.

The reason why I want to talk about it on an episode is because I see it come up so often in the membership with people that I work with who are really frustrated and really feel like they might be in denial about their drinking. There's so much that I have to do in order to work with them and help them really understand that what they think is denial is not denial at all. It's important to clean that up because there's so much shame around this.

Let's just dive in. The idea of denial or being in denial about your drinking, it's a cliché, right? When it comes to drinking too much. I just think about my own life, all the times that I have heard people say like, "Oh yeah. They cannot admit that they have a problem" or "That person doesn't want to admit that they're an alcoholic. They're in denial."

We have this very ingrained idea that some people just refuse to accept the truth of their situation. They're lying to themselves because maybe telling the truth or accepting the reality of their situation, it would just be too painful.

In order to avoid that pain, they just keep lying to themselves. We perpetuate this idea that on the one hand, there's just the truth of how much someone is drinking. On the other hand, there's this desire to ignore the truth, to turn away, to not look at it. It's a very simple, clean, matter of

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fact way to describe what's going on. It often boils down to I, the person looking at your drinking, I'm in the possession of the truth. And you, the person who is drinking too much and not doing anything about it, you're in denial.

Now, here's the thing, not only do I think that this entire framework is wrong, I actually really think that it's a cop out on the part of society. I really do. I really think it is an example of how we just fail people. Because what it does, this whole framework, it sets the person up. The person who is drinking more than they want to, it sets them up to be the problem. They're just this person that just refuses to accept the truth. If they would only accept the truth, then everything would be better. Again, I will tell you how I see the pain that this causes so many people that I work with and the shame that they are stuck in.

I will start working with people and they'll say, " Rachel, I have all these reasons for my doctor why I should cut back, but I'm not doing it. I'm still drinking more than I should." I'll have people say, " I have elevated liver panels and still, I'll have a really bad day and I find myself opening up a bottle of wine in the kitchen." People will say, "I just hate that I'm not setting the example that I want to when it comes to my drinking and what my kids are seeing." People will say, "I don't like how I act when I'm drinking, but I'm not changing either."

People will come to me and they'll have all of these examples and feel so much shame around all of these examples and believe, " The problem is that I must be in denial about what is going on."

There is just so much shame that comes along for the ride when this is a situation that you think that you might be in. It's like, "I should know better, but I'm not doing the thing that I should know better about." Or "I'm not learning my lesson. In some way, am I just in denial about all of this?" That feels terrible. That thinking, that mindset of, "I should just know how to do the thing that I know is good for me" is actually incredibly poisonous.

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Because when you have that belief that you should just know how to do what is good for you, you will then tell the story of what is happening, the story of your drinking. You will use it as proof that some part of you is in denial. A lot of people will say, "How do I get out of denial? How do I stop lying to myself?" And they will be really surprised when my response is, "You're not in denial and you're not lying to yourself. This has nothing to do with denial. This has nothing to do with not wanting to face the quote unquote truth of your situation. In fact, denial is the totally wrong word to explain what is actually going on."

When I offer this up to people, they'll look at me like, "Okay, but what else is the explanation? I have all these good reasons to cut back or to stop, but I'm not doing it. So, what else is there?"

But here's what I want you to know if you're listening. If you can relate to this, what I want you to know is that you're not in denial. You just haven't been given the how. You haven't been told how to actually go about creating change. If you want to change your relationship with alcohol, you need more than just the knowledge of what's good for me and what's healthy for me. You need to know, "How do I actually go about doing this? What am I supposed to do next? What are the tools that I need?"

I go back and I think about my own situation and when I felt so stuck with my drinking and I would have moments where I was just like, " Rachel, this is just not working. It's not working your relationship with alcohol. You're drinking too much. You're doing things that you regret. It's causing these problems in your life. Now what?"

One of the biggest problems is that we have given people basically one acceptable course of action. If you're struggling with your drinking, then you need to go to AA. You need to admit that you're an alcoholic. You have to stop drinking for the rest of your life. You have to make amends for your wrongs. You got to try to be a better person.

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We've been told this story that is so black and white, either you're a normal drinker or you're an alcoholic. That's it. If you're an alcoholic, here's what you need to do. But what if you are like me and you're thinking to yourself, "This doesn't feel right. I'm not happy. with my current situation. I know that it's not serving me, but this solution that everyone is telling me is the only solution out there doesn't feel right. I don't feel like that's the right solution for me. I don't feel like I'm a normal drinker, but I also don't feel like an alcoholic. I'm in this gray area."

What do you do if you, like me, don't feel like that standard approach is the right approach for you? Either because you don't resonate with the concepts or because you don't want to stop drinking forever, or because you really don't like the idea of focusing on your powerlessness or because the label alcoholic doesn't fit, then what are you supposed to do?

What's the how that society provides for us then? I will tell you, it's nothing, nada. We are given next to nothing if that is a situation that you're in. It's basically like, "I don't know, just figure it out. If you can't figure this out on your own, then obviously you have a big problem." It doesn't make any sense.

Because here's the truth. People make split second decisions all the time that don't necessarily align with what they actually want or who they want to be. Maybe you like whip out a credit card knowing full well that you don't have the money in the bank. Or you grab that fourth slice of pizza, even though you have just been going on and on and on about how you want to lose weight. Or you snap at your kids over the littlest things, even though you promised yourself, "I'm not going to be like my parents."

We procrastinate or sabotage goals that are deeply important to us. Yes, sometimes we stop and grab the bottle of wine on the way home, even though we promised ourselves that we wouldn't drink tonight, or we order that third round, even though we swore up and down that we would stop it two.

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What I want you to know, that all of these moments, no matter what it is, but making these split second decisions that don't necessarily align with who you want to be or what you want, that's normal. Now, listen, I know not all of us struggle in the same way, but everybody struggles managing impulses sometimes.

No one is immune to that. What I want to suggest is that the very concept that society has about denial, that is the real problem. Because the way we talk about it, it only creates shame. Not only that, it makes the wrong conclusion about how we actually go about changing our behaviors, the foundation that we need to build a new behavior and to change a habit. It suggests that, " Change is just about accepting the truth, the facts of the situation. If you're drinking more than you want, then just accept the truth and cut back. If it's not good for your health, then just accept the truth and stop. If it's causing problems and just accept the truth, you can't drink like others."

That is what we tell people all the time. What society tells us to do basically is the what and ignores the how. " How am I supposed to do this if nobody is giving me any explanation?" that really was the place that I was in for the longest time. What is the how? Society always defaults to this conversation about people being in denial because it gives us this tidy explanation for what needs to be done to change. It's just, "Face the facts." But I'm like, "So face the facts and then what? What's the how?"

Because the message is so ingrained that we have about denial, we then, what do we do? We proceed to beat ourselves up as if, "Okay, the fault is just me." That's what I was doing all the time like, " Rachel, I was so stupid. What were you thinking? Why can't you learn your lesson?"

Meanwhile, nobody teaches us anything about the conflict between the lower brain and the higher brain. Oh my God, this is something that we all need to know. We all need the basics on how the brain works. The lower brain and the higher brain, they have different goals and they will come into conflict.

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We're certainly not taught how to manage the reward system or our urges or our cravings or excuses. We're not taught what to do when we say no to the drink, we say no to the reward, and then we have to deal with everything else that comes up. We're not taught what the brain learns when we keep going back for another reward. We're not taught even the very basics. We're not taught about serving sizes or, what alcohol by volume means and why we should pay attention to it and the ways in which alcohol is marketed and formulated, especially for teens and young adults to make it more appealing. We certainly aren't taught anything about mindful drinking.

There's all of this information. Around the how that frankly is being denied to us. That is the real denial going on. What I want to suggest to you that right now, if you are listening and you feel stuck, you feel like, "I should be able to figure this out. This shouldn't be so hard for me. I should be able to learn my lesson. I should stop making these stupid mistakes. I should just be better at keeping my commitments."

What I want you to know is the reason that you're stuck has nothing to do with you being in denial. It's has nothing to do with you being unwilling to face the facts. The reason that you're stuck is because you are missing the tools to handle everything that will invariably come up to the surface when you say no to that urge or no to the second drink or no to your friend's insistence that like, "Oh, really just have another. Don't make me drink alone." That's the real problem. You are not the problem.

The problem is the lack of tools, information, and instruction that we're not getting. It's just like a black hole here. That is the real problem. On top of that, blaming someone and saying, "Well, the reason that they aren't changing is just because they're in denial. They're unwilling to face the facts." Honestly, this is how we, the collective we, society, this is how we just wipe our hands clean and say like, "Hey, this is not my problem. This is your problem."

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This is what I want you to know today. If you've been shaming yourself about your drinking, you're not in denial. This is not just a matter of facing the facts. This is about learning the how. How that we have all been denied as far as I'm concerned. I will tell you this, when you get the how, when you understand how your brain works, when you understand how to manage your cravings and your urges and your excuses, when you understand all the stuff that's happening behind the scenes and your Drink Archetypes, when you understand all of this, when you learn how your brain works, when you get these tools, trust me, change is so much easier because you actually have something to work with.

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