

Ep #372: Hair of the Dog



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Rachel Hart

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All right everybody, welcome back. Today, we are talking about something called "hair of the dog." It's a very weird term, but it essentially means when you wake up feeling hungover, you have a drink in order to feel better. We're going to talk about why this is, why some people swear about it, and why it's been around for a long time. And if you actually have a hangover, what you should do to feel better. Because a key part of why you're suffering is something that the vast majority of people overlook. It's something that I overlooked for a really long time. You need to understand this if you want not just to feel better, but also not be caught in a cycle that's actually going to get in the way of helping make sure that you don't drink so much next time that you end up hungover.

All right, let's start with this weird term, "hair of the dog." It is really very strange, but apparently it's an expression that comes from a medieval folk remedy for rabies. Back in the day, the idea was if a rabid dog bit you, the cure supposedly was to place a hair from that dog in your wound. We know now you are not going to cure rabies by using the hair of the dog that bit you. You're not going to cure a hangover by drinking alcohol. But I think it helps to really understand why so many people really swear by this. You wake up and you're feeling awful and it's like, "Just have a quick drink. That will help."

The first thing you need to know is that there is a lot of debate about what precisely causes a hangover which I think is wild that here we are in 2024 and we still aren't certain about what exactly causes a hangover. But most research points to a mixture of things. That your hangover that you feel is a mix of your body going through alcohol withdrawal. Your liver attempting to break down alcohol and remove it from your system and sleep deprivation.

When you wake up in the morning and your mouth is dry, and your head is pounding and you feel nauseous, one of the things you need to know is that drinking more alcohol, it can help with the symptoms of withdrawal.

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Because withdrawal happens when you stop or reduce the intake of a drug. If you're adding more of the drug back into your system, then sure, you might temporarily ease the symptoms of withdrawal, but eventually the withdrawal is coming unless you're constantly giving yourself a steady stream of alcohol, which we know is not a good idea.

And then there's the piece about numbing pain. Alcohol can potentially help numb the pain you're in because alcohol affects the central nervous system. If you're able to quiet the pathway that's communicating between your nerves and your brain, then sure, you could feel less pain. But here's the thing, in order to get the analgesic effect from alcohol, in other words, in order to get the pain relieving effects that alcohol can provide, you need to have more than a single drink.

This is not a good option either. But the truth is when you're drinking to alleviate the symptoms of a hangover, you're ultimately extending the time it takes for your body to recover. Because alcohol is not a substance that your body can just sit idly by and do nothing about.

It is a toxic substance for the body, which means that your liver has to get rid of it. At some point, you're gonna have to metabolize the alcohol that you drank last night. Plus, if you're relying on hair of the dog, you're gonna have to metabolize the alcohol that you drink the next day. And the more alcohol that you add to your system, the more you're taxing your body and prolonging the inevitable.

Just from a physical standpoint, it's important to understand that the hair of the dog is not helping matters. But even when you understand what's happening in your body when you're hungover and why hair of the dog doesn't work, I think it's important to really explain why some people might still be tempted to have a drink.

And in order to understand that temptation, it's important to understand why exactly a hangover can feel bad. So, yes, on the one hand, you got all these physical symptoms from drinking too much. You've got the headache

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and the dehydration, nausea, vomiting, diarrhea. You might be sweating. You might feel dizzy. You might have a racing heart. You might have sensitivity to light and sound. You've got all these physical symptoms, but on the other hand, and this is a piece that's often overlooked, is the emotional suffering that can come with a hangover. And that emotional suffering has a lot to do with what your thought patterns are and what you're making the hangover mean while you're in it.

What I'm talking about is that internal dialogue that's like, you wake up, you immediately have that cotton mouth and a splitting headache. And it's like, "Oh, God, why was I so stupid? I can't believe I did that. What was I thinking? When am I going to learn my lesson?" This was the narrative for me just every time I woke up hungover. It was the same asking myself these questions. "Rachel, what were you thinking? When are you going to figure this out? What's wrong with you?" All the self-recrimination that you have the next day, that's going to create a whole host of negative emotions. You might be feeling anxious or sad or angry at yourself. You might be embarrassed. You might be feeling defeated or hopeless or resigned, and you probably have a boatload of shame.

Now, here's the thing, and I do think that this is an important piece of the puzzle as well. Some of the negative mood that you experience the next day, it is actually just related to your brain trying to come back into homeostasis. Your brain is trying to rebalance the chemicals that went all haywire the day before.

I remember a lot in my own journey waking up after a night where I'd had a lot to drink. And my eyes would open and I would immediately just feel either really down or really anxious. And for the longest time, I didn't understand what was going on. I didn't understand that what was happening was the impact that alcohol had on my brain's neurotransmitters.

When you think about it, we have all these neurotransmitters in the brain, these chemicals, they impact our mood, and on a normal day, we're not

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getting a whole flood of them. They're generally being dripped out at a steady low rate. You might get a boost here or there. You might Go for a run and get that runner's high. You might find yourself feeling really good after connecting with a friend or watching a funny movie. Maybe you get good news at work. But for the most part, the drip of neurotransmitters that you get is pretty steady. The reason alcohol and drugs have such a stark and profound impact on our mood is because of their impact on our neurotransmitters.

Instead of that regular steady drip, alcohol and drugs really flood the system. They can give you a huge boost, which sounds great because who doesn't want to feel really good? But the problem is what goes up? Guess what? It must come down. And when you go way, way, way up, the drop down is going to feel even more extreme.

And your brain has to come back into equilibrium. The body is always trying to return to homeostasis, but that's not going to happen in an instant. It can't. We can't just flip a switch and immediately come back into balance after a night where we have been flooding our system. It takes time for your body and brain to replace these chemicals and there's no magical way to speed this process up.

Some of your mood the next day, it is just, in fact, your brain rebalancing. It is what went up the night before now it's down and you got to build back up. But what I have found working with so many people, is that a large portion of how you feel, your mood the next day, feeling all those negative emotions, a large portion of that is really self inflicted.

It's all the self-recrimination and beating yourself up and shaming and blaming that comes with the questions of, "Why did I drink so much? Why was I so stupid? What am I gonna figure this out and learn my lesson?" And one of the things that I help people understand is that the physical symptoms are actually much more tolerable when you remove the emotional suffering.

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Now you may hear me say this and think like, "Well, why would we do this? Why would we want to help someone feel better from a hangover? Shouldn't we feel awful? Shouldn't the hangover feel as bad as possible and then it's like, that will teach me?" But think about it, think about your own experiences in your life. Does it work like that? In the immediate aftermath, when you have a terrible hangover, you might think like, "Oh God, I'm never doing that again." But then what happens? a week later or a month later, some amount of time goes by and we forget all about that suffering.

I had more terrible hangovers than I can count. And more times when I swore like, "Oh my God, Rachel, never again." I'd write it out in journals sometimes. I have pages still where I would be like, "Never forget how you feel right now." And then I would go back on my word, because a hangover is future suffering.

And in the moment, when you're saying no to your desire, when you're saying no to a craving, the suffering that you feel about not saying yes to the drink or not having another, it's suffering in the here and now. And until you figure out a way to deal with the here and now suffering, you're always going to be tempted to ignore the future suffering because suffering in the present, it's just more immediate. It grabs your attention. And frankly, when you do the work to clear up the shame and blame and all the self-recrimination that you have when you have a hangover, guess what? It's not about giving yourself a pass. It's about setting yourself up to actually take meaningful steps to help change the habit.

This is where I think society has it backwards. We're sure that shame is the answer. "I just need to feel bad enough about myself. And then I'm going to do something and then I'm going to figure this out." But I look and see not only in my own life, but in the thousands of people that I have worked with.

What I see happening again and again is that shame isn't the solution. It's a place where people get endlessly stuck. Because when you feel that shame, the next day, what do you do? You go to extremes. You either want

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to rush and like, "Oh my God, forget about what happened. I'm going to start over." I have a lot of people that fall into that trap. I used to fall into that trap myself. It's just like, "Okay, now I'm going to be good. We're just going to, not going to look at what happened. I'm just going to like swear up and down that I'm going to be good."

Well, okay, how are you going to be good if you don't understand why what happened happened? That's problem number one. People will rush to try to just forget about what happened and try to promise to be good, but they won't have any of the data to help them actually figure out, "Hey, how am I going to show up differently next time?" Or shame will send you to the extreme of deciding that change is impossible. It's just like, "Ugh, forget it. All is lost. I'm never going to figure this out." And then when you decide that change is impossible and then you feel awful because it's like, "Ugh, this thing that really is causing me a lot of suffering in my life. There's nothing I can do about it."

You will fall into the trap, which I also fell into, which was like, "Okay, if I can't figure this out, I might as well at least feel good. I might as well at least have a drink." That mindset isn't great either. And then a lot of times people just ping pong back and forth between these two extremes. And none of these actions when you are in a shame spiral, they're not getting you any closer to change.

Often what I really help people understand is that the real habit you have to break if you want to change your relationship with alcohol, whatever that means, if it's drinking less, drinking rarely, not drinking at all. If you want to change your relationship with alcohol, you have to break the habit of immediately rushing to start over and promising that you're going to be good or just like giving up.

Because these two things have so much more in common than people realize because they're both driven by shame. And shame will always prevent you from figuring out what went wrong. It will always get in the way of figuring out, "Hey, how do I avoid this from happening again?" Because it

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sets you up in this dichotomy of good and bad. "I was bad. Now I have to be good or I've been so bad, there's no hope for me to be good." But good and bad are not the way out of this.

You need to put good and bad aside. Instead of this framework built on morality, you need a framework built on learning and curiosity. And asking yourself questions that actually help like, "Hey, what actually happened? What were my triggers yesterday really about? What was happening when I had these cravings? What excuses did I use?" You need to step into the role of a scientist, not a moralist. Being a moralist is not going to help you at all.

Here's the thing, when you're hungover and you're looking for that quick relief the next day, it's helpful for you to understand, "Hey, what's actually going on? Am I trying to ease physical symptoms or am I trying to escape my internal dialogue that's creating all this emotional suffering?"

Because when it comes to physical symptoms, whatever it is, headache, dehydration, vomiting, diarrhea, sweating, all that stuff. There's things you can do. You can rehydrate yourself. You can drink plenty of water, plenty of fluids with electrolytes. You can eat carbohydrates to raise your blood sugar. You can eat nutrient dense foods that are rich in potassium and B vitamins and zinc. You can take pain reliever to help with the headache as long as it's not acetaminophen or Tylenol. You can give yourself plenty of rest. But none of those things are going to help you change the narrative in your head about why it is that you drank too much and that's what needs changing.

For most people, when you really start to question the pain that you're trying to ease, most people will see, yeah the physical effects of a hangover, they can suck. But it's the emotional suffering that feels so much worse. And the emotional suffering will not be helped with more alcohol or medicine or fluids or rest. That requires thought work. That requires understanding you're drinking from the perspective of, "Hey, what tools was

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"I missing? What tools do I need? What information am I lacking?" Rather than, "You should just simply know better."

We really want you to think about this the next time you have a hangover, when you're looking for relief. Is it relief from your physical symptoms or is it relief from the emotional suffering? Which one are you actually trying to fix? And of course, if you're tempted to drink, know that "hair of the dog" doesn't work and you're just delaying the inevitable.

But if you find yourself with a lot of emotional suffering and you notice that you're wanting to rush to like, "Okay, I'm just going to promise to be good." Or you're falling into that mindset of like, "Oh, I'm never going to figure this out." Know that that happens because of shame. And that shame happens because of your internal dialogue. And that's what you need to work on and clean up first if you want to show up differently in a meaningful way in the future.

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