

Ep #373: What's Wrong with a Reward?



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Rachel Hart

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All right, everybody, today we're talking about the question, "What's so wrong with wanting a reward?" This question came up recently inside the membership and I answered it there, but I really wanted to answer it on the podcast as well, because I know a lot of you think about this sometimes.

When you're trying to drink less or stop drinking or just have a healthy relationship with alcohol, you might find yourself, when you're saying no, wondering the same thing. "Why is it so bad to want a reward?" I certainly used to ask myself this question all the time. My goal in life was not to be a monk. I didn't want an existence without pleasures.

In fact, when I thought about a life without many of my go-to rewards, which for a long time, those rewards were alcohol, cigarettes, sugar. It started me down the path of, "God, why am I even saying no? You only live once. Am I really supposed to live a life without any rewards or any pleasure? That's not what I want." But I hope if you are a listener to the podcast, you know by now, this is not the goal. A life without pleasure is not what we're aiming for. The goal is not to be so physically healthy that it trumps all pleasures that we can get from our environment.

The goal is to feel like your life isn't being run by chasing after rewards. The goal is to feel in control. The goal is actually to be able to access more pleasure in your body, not less. And so rewards, just like alcohol, they're not good or bad. We don't need to demonize them, but we also want to be really careful not to glorify them. When we start glorifying them, you might find yourself in this place of feeling like you're defending your reward.

This is what I used to bounce back and forth between. I was in this place of glorifying the rewards that I was chasing after, and then a little bit later, demonizing them. In my mind, it was really like, "Alcohol makes everything better. Alcohol is the worst. Chocolate is amazing. Chocolate is bad for me. Sugar is the best. Sugar is poison." You get the picture. It's that ping

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pongging between glorifying and then demonizing that is often the real problem, because it puts you in a love-hate relationship where everything is about the extremes rather than settling into a healthy relationship.

Rewards are neutral. Rewards are not the problem. In fact, they can't be the problem because the human brain was designed to find, remember, and prioritize rewards in our environment. Our internal reward system is essential for our survival.

If rewards aren't the problem, what's the problem? The problem is when you feel like the reward is controlling you rather than the other way around. When you seek out rewards to the detriment of your physical and emotional health, when you feel caught up in all this chatter in your mind about the reward and should I or shouldn't I and how much you're consuming, and when you feel unable to control yourself, those are the real problems.

But here's the thing, the rewards that we seek out, whether it's alcohol or something else, they're often a mismatch for what we truly need. One thing I talk about a lot is understanding the wisdom of your craving. If you can look at your desire for rewards as normal and not bad, you can start to see that the craving that you have for a reward, it has an intelligence.

Think about it this way, for a lot of people, they get into the habit of pouring a drink as soon as they get home from work. And it's just like, "The day is done. I'm going to have a beer. I'm going to pour myself a glass of wine." And when you get into that habit, and all of a sudden what was a treat becomes this daily ritual. And then you don't like how much you're drinking and you find yourself maybe drinking more. And then you decide, " I need to cut back or I want to change this." When you decide to do that, you decide to change, you can get into this wrestling match with your desire for a reward.

You're wanting it and not wanting it. But here's the thing, that wrestling match is not going to help you. Being in that tug of war, that's not a great place to be because then you're always in this place where the craving is

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the enemy, it's the problem, the reward is the problem. And you're back in that love-hate relationship. But if you're curious, you can start to ask the question, " Hey, what is this really about? What is my desire for reward right now trying to tell me?"

I think a lot about end of the day drinking. It's something that I worked on in my own life. It's something that I've helped thousands of people with. It's so common. And I think about what it's actually trying to tell us. Sometimes it's trying to tell us that we're feeling dehydrated or we have low blood sugar and we actually don't even realize that that's what's going on. And then we get in the habit of drinking to take the edge off of thirst or hunger.

Now, of course, if that's what's really going on, alcohol is a mismatch for what you truly need in the moment. Sometimes that drink is about, "Oh God, I'm just exhausted at the end of the day." Again, alcohol is a mismatch for what you really need, which is rest. Sometimes that drink at the end of the day is about coming home to an empty house or feeling disconnected from the people that you love, or not being able to shut off your anxiety or your worries about work or something happening in your life. Sometimes it can be about feeling resentful. Sometimes it can be about feeling bored.

Again, this isn't about the desire for reward being good or bad. And it's not about alcohol being good or bad. It's about unknowingly creating this mismatch in the brain. You end up seeking out the wrong solution for a real need, a need that needs to be addressed.

Because no matter how much you drink, it's not going to hydrate you. It's not going to fix your blood sugar. It's not going to help your body rest. It's not going to help you feel less lonely or anxious or resentful or bored.

Sure, it can temporarily mask these things. It may be able to mask how you are feeling in the moment. But when the effects wear off, the need is still there. Alcohol wasn't designed to, nor can it, meet these underlying needs.

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The desiring for a reward, it isn't bad, it's merely a sign that that something needs your attention.

When I was working with this person in the membership they were talking about like, "I just want a soft chair and a glass of wine at the end of the day. And what's so wrong with that?" And I told them, "If we just start from the place of there's nothing wrong with that. There's nothing bad about wanting that, but let's just get curious. Why do you want it? Why does that desire for a reward feel so strong?"

Because if you're running yourself ragged, if you're ignoring your physical needs all day long, if you're putting everyone else's needs before your own, that glass of wine and the comfy chair at the end of the day isn't going to help you with what you're really after and what you really need. In fact, drinking at the end of the day may very well have the opposite effect because then you're able to temporarily appease yourself. The drink will temporarily make you forget about these things, forget about these needs. You don't have to pay attention to it, but it's a mismatch. And as long as that mismatch is there, what will happen is you will prolong not addressing these deeper needs that are calling out to be addressed.

This is what I want you to think about the next time you are craving a reward. And especially if you have a love-hate relationship with your desire for rewards, or you find yourself in that place of like, "What's so wrong?" You find yourself getting defensive. Rewards are not good or bad. If we can just view them in this neutral space, then can you be curious about it? Can you start to ask yourself, "What is my desire for a reward trying to reveal to me right now? What do I really need? What is it trying to tell me? What am I possibly overlooking by chasing after this reward? Is there something in my life that isn't working right now and is trying to get my attention?" When you use rewards as a doorway into getting to know yourself better, suddenly they're a lot less of a problem. They're actually quite helpful.

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

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