

Ep #375: The Problem with Willpower



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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 375.

All right, everybody, welcome back. Today, we are going to talk about the problem with willpower and why you need to stop treating willpower like the Holy Grail when it comes to drinking less or not drinking. I will tell you, that is what I did for the longest time. I really wish that someone had told me years into my journey, "Rachel, willpower is not the Holy Grail. You need some other tools." Because I spent so long just wishing like, "Oh God, what's wrong with me? Why don't I just have more self-discipline? Why can't I keep my commitments?"

I truly thought this was solely a problem of not having enough willpower. I focused on that for years and years at the expense of understanding the inner workings of the habit. Just believing that more discipline, more willpower was going to be the solution to all my problems.

When I was preparing for this episode, I was doing a little research on how people define willpower. One of the definitions that I found, I think it really captures one of the big misunderstandings that we have about willpower and its ability to successfully help us change our relationship with alcohol.

The definition that I found is that willpower is defined as the ability to resist short-term gratification in pursuit of long-term goals or objectives. When you hear me say that, sounds very reasonable. It makes a lot of sense. When you think about it like, "I just gotta focus on my ability to say no to short-term gratification. I gotta say no to that instant gratification that I get from a drink because I'm in pursuit of this long-term goal." And maybe when you think about the goal that you have around alcohol, a lot of people frame it in terms of health. "I just want to protect my health. I want to stay healthy longer." Maybe you frame it in terms of like, "I don't want to go overboard anymore. I don't want to get drunk. I don't want to embarrass myself." Or maybe you think of your long-term goals like, "I just don't want to have all this chatter. I don't want to have all this drama in my mind about

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drinking. Am I going to? Am I not going to? I just want to have a take it or leave it approach to alcohol."

One of the things that I want you to understand is that when we focus on willpower as being the solution, and I did this as well, we see it as this tug of war between, "I could just have my instant gratification or I could be working on this long-term goal." Here's what I want you to know. When you view it in this narrow framework, it really does make sense why you're just focusing on like, "I just got to find more of it. I just got to have more self control, more discipline, more willpower. That's going to be the solution." But I think that's where a lot of us get into trouble. Because what I want you to understand is that the desire to drink is not just about instant gratification.

We have to really understand this because when we frame it as just like, "Oh, it's just about instant gratification." What you end up doing is you can very easily look at your desire to drink and regard it as unimportant or silly or not mattering. And I think that's why a lot of times we get into this place of really judging ourselves like, "God, why was I so stupid? Why can't I learn my lesson?" Because we're looking at our desire to drink. We're looking at through this very, very narrow lens of, "It's just about instant gratification."

What I want you to understand is that the key to changing the habit really is understanding that your desire is about something bigger. The drink in front of you can represent something much more powerful and much deeper than just instant gratification. In fact, understanding this helps you start to see why willpower and self control and discipline can be so ineffective. When you start to understand what that drink represents, it gives you a whole window into what is going on in the moment when you feel like you're in that tug of war with yourself. One of the most powerful ways to understand this desire beyond just instant gratification is to know your Drink Archetypes. Now, I know you guys have heard me talk about this on the podcast. If you have not heard me talk about this, if you don't know what

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your Drink Archetypes are, I really encourage you to go take the quiz and find out.

You'll get all your results for all eight archetypes. It will tell you your top two, your primary and secondary archetypes, which is the place where you really need to start your work and how these archetypes impact your drinking. Taking the quiz is not about giving you a label and being like, "Oh, we've decided that you're an alcoholic or you're a problematic drinker." It has nothing to do with that. It has to do really with what your brain has learned that the drink represents. If you haven't done that, go to drinktype.com and take the quiz. It really will help so much with everything that I'm teaching here to know where you stand with these different archetypes. Let's talk about why willpower can be so ineffective when it comes to understanding the eight different Drink Archetypes.

Let's talk about The Mask archetype for example. If that is activated, that archetype and the drink, your brain thinks that the drink represents confidence in social situations. Let me tell you this, feeling confident in social situations is not some trivial short-term goal. That's something that truly really matters for people. It's not this like, "Oh, it's just a struggle between instant gratification or my long-term health goals." No, feeling confident in social situations that's a real important, meaningful goal that many people have.

If The Escape archetype is activated, and the drink represents a way to stop thinking and maybe forget what's bothering you. Again, the ability to stop worrying or ruminating or catastrophizing, these are not unimportant goals. These goals really matter.

If The Upgrade archetype is activated and the drink represents a way to elevate your experience, I think it's really important to just understand that humans are wired to feel wonder and awe. And these are things that we seek out. Wanting things in our life to feel more special, more celebratory, that's not a weird thing. That's not wrong. But again, you start to see like,

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"Well, maybe my desire in the moment isn't just about instant gratification. Maybe there's something more important going on here."

If The Reward archetype is activated so this is when the drink represents a boundary with work or permission to stop working. I think that's a pretty meaningful goal to not have to have work infiltrate every waking hour of your life.

If The Connector archetype is activated and the drink represents a way to strengthen or solidify your social bonds. Well, again, think about the importance of relationships in our lives, the relationships that we have with friends and family. This is not a trivial thing. It's not just important. It can be important for our well being to have strong, solid relationships.

If The Hourglass archetype is activated and the drink represents a way to pass the time when you're bored. This is not just like, "Oh, I just want instant gratification." You start to see like, "Yeah, there's something deeper going on here." And yes, I have episodes talking about boredom and boredom is normal. A big part of the work that I teach people is how to reframe boredom. It's not this thing that we're always trying to escape. What I want you to know also is that occasionally being bored is not a problem. Chronic boredom, which is something that a lot of people that I work with find themselves dealing with. They're trying to escape that chronic boredom that shows up every night. That's a sign that there's some part of your life that needs your attention. This is not a trivial thing to just say, "It's about me saying no to instant gratification."

If The Release archetype is activated and the drink might represent freedom from maybe social norms. It's that way of wanting to feel more authentically like yourself and not constantly censor or monitor what you say or what you're thinking or how you're acting. Again, this is not about instant gratification, wanting to be more authentically you. That's a pretty important, meaningful goal.

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And finally, there's The Remedy archetype when this is activated and the drink represents relief from physical pain or insomnia. Again, this is not just a matter of, "Okay, it's all about instant gratification." But when we're thinking about willpower being the solution here, we put ourselves into this mindset of, "On the one hand. It's all about that instant gratification. And on the other hand, there's my long-term goal." That willpower mindset ignores this really crucial piece of the puzzle of what the drink represents. And the reason why willpower often fails, why so many of us are like, "God, why am I not more disciplined? Why don't I have more control?" It's not because something is wrong with you. It's because when you're trying to use willpower, you are inadvertently ignoring that there are multiple long-term goals at play. Yes, you want to be healthy. And yes, you know that drinking less or not drinking is going to support that goal, but you also have all these other goals that are no less important and wrapped up in what the drink has come to symbolize for the brain. Attempting to drink less via willpower just reinforces that it's a battle to say no. It's a battle between your short-term desire for instant gratification which is bad, and your good, meaningful desire for a long-term goal. When in truth, what's going on is you have multiple, legitimate, meaningful, long-term goals that are wrapped up in the habit of drinking and can feel at odds with each other when you're trying to change, when you're trying to say no.

This is why willpower fails. Not because you're weak or because you lack self-discipline or you would have failed the marshmallow test as a kid. But because you have these competing goals at work behind the scenes. For a lot of you, when you don't understand the Drink Archetypes, you're not even addressing this piece of the puzzle. But that competing goal, it's still there. It's still calling out. It's still important to you.

I'm not trying to throw willpower completely out of the equation when it comes to changing your relationship with alcohol. I know that willpower can at times be important. Certainly, especially early on in my journey there were moments. Especially because I didn't have any of these tools and no one was teaching me about the inner workings of the habit and I didn't

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have the Drink Archetypes. There were moments where I just needed to grit my teeth. But the ability to resist temptation and just say no, it's not going to carry you through to where you want to end up. Because if that is all you have at your disposal, just say no, just grit your teeth, just resist temptation, just avoid being around temptation. If that's all you have, it's like this muscle that becomes fatigued with overuse. Repeatedly relying on willpower can actually drain your ability to withstand future temptation. Why? Because that approach of just say no and focus on self-discipline ignores the goals connected with your Drink Archetypes. It ignores that you have multiple competing long-term goals that are equally important and legitimate.

Inside the membership, I talk about it often as trying to build an emergency kit. So think about it. You're trying to build an emergency kit for everything that you're going to need, but then you just put a flashlight in. That's what we do a lot with willpower. It's like, "I just need a flashlight." And flashlights are great. They're great when the power goes out, but they can't help you charge a phone and they can't fix a scraped knee. The same is true when it comes to your goal of drinking less. You need different tools for different scenarios. You need tools for your triggers and cravings and excuses and the different situations that you're in and the different archetypes that are activated. You got to have all of these tools. And when you have the right tools, it is so much easier to feel in control than when you're constantly in this place of like, "Oh, just say no."

One thing that I want you to do, I think this is going to be a really interesting exercise for you guys to think about. I want you to think about what you would do if we were just to take willpower off the table completely like if it wasn't an option. If you didn't have an option for like, "I can just grit my teeth and I need more discipline." If you took it off the table, what would you need to develop in order to make it easier for you to say no? This is gonna break your brain a little bit because you're used to only thinking about saying no in terms of discipline. But I want you to think about if I took

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it off the table, "What would I need to develop? What skills would I need to have?"

Maybe for some of you listening who feel a lot of anxiety in social situations and you use a drink in order to feel less anxious, maybe you would need to start to normalize the anxiety that you feel. I talk about this a lot. I was coaching someone on this recently. This was the very issue that she was working on and I was sharing with her the idea of normalizing anxiety can simply be taking the spotlight off yourself. When you're really in that like, "Oh God, I feel so anxious or I feel so awkward." It's just like there's a spotlight only shining on you and you have to expand the spotlight out.

One of the ways to do that is to practice a thought like, "I'm not the only person here that's feeling a little anxious or feeling really awkward right now." You start to normalize it so it's not just like, "Oh, the spotlight is only on me and I'm the only one and everyone else is feeling okay, but here I am." Maybe that's a skill that you'd need to develop, which by the way has nothing to do with willpower. Maybe if you're someone who get home at the end of the day and you immediately want to pour yourself a glass of wine before you've even had dinner. It's like just what you do. Day is done. You walk through the door. That's your routine. Maybe one of the things that you would need to focus on is are you hydrated during the day? Are you eating during the day? Are you even paying attention to your needs during the day? This is a huge thing that comes up for a lot of people that they spend their day putting everybody's needs ahead of their own, including their own physical needs. Just staying hydrated and staying fed. You get home and not only are you exhausted from focusing on everyone else, but your body isn't even getting what it needs. You're famished and you're dehydrated. And when you immediately try to solve that with a drink, it's not going to work very well.

Part of the work might be, I have to learn how to start really treating my needs like they matter, like they're important, as important as I treat everyone else's needs that I'm always paying attention to and catering to. If

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you know that sometimes a drink is really connected with just wanting to escape, wanting to turn off your brain or to stop thinking, maybe you need the skill of, "How do I stop catastrophizing, or ruminating, or always going to worst case scenario?" None of these things will be addressed by willpower. Maybe you need to get better at tapping into all the pleasures around you. I say this all the time to people that I want you to learn and that I am teaching is not about saying no to all pleasure in life. I want you to have more pleasure. because if you feel like the hardest time to say no to your cravings is when it's like you're out at a fancy dinner or you're watching a sunset.

If that feels like saying no, all of a sudden just diminishes your experience, things feel less special or less elevated or less celebratory, then the answer is not, "Well, let's just have more discipline and figure out how to say no better." The answer is, "How do I actually get better in tapping into pleasures that aren't pleasures that I consume?" Because nobody wants to go through life just being like, "I said no to all the pleasures, but at least I'm healthy." That does not sound fun. It doesn't sound fun to me. I know it doesn't sound fun to you. Maybe that is a totally different skill to start thinking about, which most people never really focus on, which is like, "Do I even know how to tap into pleasures that have nothing to do with consuming something?"

The list really goes on when you think about this question, if you took willpower off the table, then what? What would you need to focus on? The point is when you stop treating willpower like it's some sort of Holy Grail and you put it in its rightful place, which is one of many tools, you're able to start to actually see the resources that you truly need when you come face to face with temptation and face to face with these competing goals that we can't just write off as like, "Oh, it's just silly. My desire for instant gratification." No, competing goals that are meaningful and matter. Think about this in your own work, in your own attempts for how you have tried to change your relationship with alcohol. How much have you believed that willpower was a solution and more self-discipline was a solution? How

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much have you relied on it? How much has your focus been there and can we start to expand your focus to include more of these tools so that instead of feeling worn down and resentful, which by the way makes you more likely to give in, you start having these other tools at your disposal. It's not just a matter of gritting your teeth all the time.

If you have had an overreliance on willpower, which by the way, pretty much everybody has, if you know that you have this overreliance on willpower, I want to invite you to join me for a brand new challenge that I am doing starting April 8th. It is going to teach you how to drink less over five days. I'm going to be teaching you all about the tools that are missing from your emergency kit. These are really simple, easy to use tools that each day of this five day challenge you will be able to put into practice. I'm so excited to be able to offer this. I've never offered anything like this before.

I'm excited just for you to start to learn, "Hey, what are these other things that I've been missing?" Because when you start to see, "Hey, maybe this isn't a problem with me." Maybe this is not, "Why don't you just have more self-discipline?" That's what I thought for the longest time. It was always like, "I was the problem." When you start to see like, "Hmm, maybe I'm not the problem. Maybe the problem is society just tells me the only thing that I need is willpower to say no. Nobody's teaching me anything else. In fact what I learned was really just scare tactics to try to keep me from drinking." That's most people's education when it comes to alcohol. When you start to see like, "There's nothing wrong with me, I'm just missing tools. Nobody ever taught me this." Not only does it get easier for you to drink less and to keep your commitments, but it just takes this huge weight off of your shoulders because you stop making the struggle to resist temptation be something negative about you. And it starts to just to be like, "Oh, I was just missing some tools from my toolkit. That's it."

I encourage all of you, if you want to join me for this Drink Less in 5 Days Challenge, we get started April 8th. It is just going to be like chock full of

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teaching and coaching and answering your questions and it's going to be amazing. Go to rachelhart.com/drinkless to register. And I hope that I will see you starting on the 8th. And I'll see you next week on the podcast.

All right, everybody. See you then.