

Ep #385: The Upgrade: What the Brain Learns



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Rachel Hart

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You are listening to the *Take a Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, Episode 385.

Whether you want to drink less or stop drinking, this podcast will help you change the habit from the inside out. We're challenging conventional wisdom about why people drink and why it can be hard to resist temptation. No labels, no judgment, just practical tools to take control of your desire and stop worrying about your drinking. Now, here's your host, Rachel Hart.

Hey everybody, welcome back. Over the next couple of weeks, I am going to be doing a series on the Drink Archetypes™. I've talked about them on the podcast before, but I wanted to do this series to really help you identify what your brain is learning when a certain archetype is activated.

If you're not familiar with the Drink Archetypes™, these are the eight different types of drinking. It really is the idea that we drink for different reasons. So, you can have four people sitting down at a table splitting a bottle of wine, each person has their own glass of wine, but each of them may be drinking for a very different reason.

One person might have The Upgrade archetype activated, another might have The Connector, a third might have The Mask, and the fourth person might be dealing with The Hourglass archetype. So, even if they're drinking appears the same on the outside, very different thoughts and feelings can be happening on the inside.

The Drink Archetypes, they're not a sign of problematic drinking. They're simply a tool to help you gain awareness about the habit and show you the areas where you need to focus your attention if you want to change. Because if you want to change your relationship with alcohol, it's simply not enough to just figure out how to manage your cravings.

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I will say, I talk about how to manage your cravings all the time, and the tools that I teach people, but that has to happen in conjunction with the Archetypes. Right, it has to happen in conjunction with whatever is stirred up inside of you. Because whatever is stirred up inside of you when you say no, nine times out of 10, that is really the most challenging part of why you're struggling to say no.

Anyway, I've talked about the archetypes on the podcast before. If you don't know what your primary and secondary archetypes are, you can go take the free quiz at DrinkType.com. But I will say, I introduced the eight archetypes about six months ago, and I have just watched so many people who I work with inside the membership just get traction so much faster, once they can very precisely see the archetype at work in a given situation.

So, I really encourage all of you listening to go take the quiz and get the information on your primary and secondary types. You'll also get additional information as well about where you fell with the other types. But those primary and secondary generally are giving you insight into where you want to really focus your energy and your time first.

The reason that I want to talk about the archetypes again and do individual episodes on each one of them for the podcast, is because when I first introduce them to all of you, I didn't really go into how each archetype works with the think-feel-act cycle. If you've been listening to my podcast from the beginning, if you're a longtime listener, you know that the think-feel-act cycle is one of the cornerstones of my approach.

It's really the piece that helps you understand that your drinking doesn't just happen, right? You didn't just polish off that bottle of wine. You didn't just polish off the six-pack. Even though sometimes it can really feel that way. I will tell you, it really felt like that for me for a long time, especially before I had the framework of the think-feel-act cycle to understand my drinking.

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But to really understand that the think-feel-act cycle is about helping you identify and connect to what your brain was thinking, how you were feeling in the moment, the moment before you said yes. The moment before you reached for another. The moment before stopped by the store. Whatever it is, you have to really understand. You have to be able to create that awareness and identify what is happening or else change will just feel so hit or miss.

The think-feel-act cycle really is the logical framework that you can apply so you can get out of the mindset of, “Ugh, it's just once I start, I can't stop. I don't know why I drink so much. I don't know, I was just stupid. I have to be more responsible next time.” When you are caught in those beliefs, you will not be able to make the progress that you want. You need that think-feel-act cycle to really understand, “Hey, what actually was happening?”

It's kind of like you look under the hood of your brain and see what was going on. Because I will tell you that all of those thoughts, “Once I start, I can't stop. I just don't know why I did that. I was just stupid,” they just amount to so much shame and confusion and feeling powerless. And none of that is going to help you on your journey to change your relationship with alcohol.

But if you have the think-feel-act cycle to really understand what is going on... And I will tell you this, yes, it keeps working even after you start drinking. Your brain just doesn't go offline... If you have that as the basis, it gives you such a strong foundation to really make change. So, focusing on the think-feel-act cycle will help you really understand what your brain learns from drinking.

This learning piece is huge. I talk about this all the time. The framework of understanding your drinking, the habit that you have that you have formed with alcohol, is a learned behavior is so important. Because if you unconsciously taught your brain to respond in a certain way, or to associate

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alcohol with certain things, or emotions, or situations, or people or beliefs or whatever, that is a crucial piece of the puzzle in order to change.

You have to know what your brain has learned so that you can teach it something else. You can't just say to yourself, "I'm not going to drink that much anymore." You have to actually teach your brain something else in order to create that lasting change; that isn't just about "Ugh, how long can I grit my teeth for?"

So, we're going to talk about the think-feel-act cycle in this series in relation to each Archetype. And today, we are starting with The Upgrade. The Upgrade is a very common archetype, because it is all about using alcohol to elevate your experience. It is the idea that drinking makes everything, the meal, the celebration, the sunset, a little bit better.

The Upgrade is an archetype that commonly appears if you find yourself often wanting to seek out the best that life has to offer. Many times, people will find that The Upgrade will show up maybe when they're preparing or cooking dinner or enjoying a meal, it can show up for celebrations or special occasions, vacation and travel. Those are really common places for The Upgrade.

It can show up if you find that you like to kind of seek out what is rare or unique, or high-end experiences. It can show up if you identify as an expert in your drink of choice; you're kind of a wine connoisseur or beer aficionado.

Now, you don't have to connect with all of these situations, it really is just understanding that when The Upgrade is activated, saying no to a drink, it will interfere with your desire for you wanting things to feel special. And that's what's really making it hard for you either to abstain or to moderate.

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Like all archetypes, The Upgrade has its own mindset trap that can make saying no really hard. You can fall into this trap of believing that things just don't feel as special without a drink. And let me tell you, I had this belief for the longest time myself. When I was doing this work, I just was like, "No, this isn't a belief, this is just a fact. This is just a truth."

But when the thoughts associated with The Upgrade really become ingrained in your relationship with alcohol, and really ingrained in the habit, what will happen is that alcohol can kind of hijack your focus and actually does the opposite, right? Instead of making everything more special, it distracts from the specialness around you. This happens based on how the think-feel-act cycle unfolds.

And so, that's what I want to go into detail about today. Now, it's really important to remember that humans have long used alcohol to mark special occasions. That is not a bad thing. It is not a bad thing.

And I think this is really important. When you're doing the work with the Archetypes, these are not about "Oh these are all problematic behaviors." Not at all. What I want you though to pay attention to, is to notice if your brain starts to crave alcohol when there are special occasions.

If you start to have that thought like, "It just makes everything better or more special. Things don't feel as special without a drink." If you start to notice that this is going on, what can happen is that it can steal your capacity for enjoyment.

So, I'm going to talk you through an example of how The Upgrade archetype affects your thoughts, your feelings and your actions to form a habit. Keep in mind, this is just one example. It is not the only way that this can unfold. There are many different variations of thoughts and feelings that can be associated with The Upgrade. But I do want you to understand how it can work.

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I'm going to start with the example of enjoying a beautiful view. I wanted to use that one, because I can't tell you the number of times that I have coached people on this. People who have gotten into the ritual of: Maybe it's a weekend and they have a nice, lovely screened-in porch. They just sit out on the porch and kind of stare out at the world. They have their glass of wine, or they have their beer, and it's just a nice little ritual.

There's nothing wrong with having a ritual like that. But when you decide that you want to change your relationship with alcohol... When you decide that you want to take a break, or you want to cut back. Or you decide, "I think I maybe want to take it out of my life." When you decide that you want to do this, but you also have The Upgrade archetype activated, they immediately will kind of come into conflict with each other. Right?

Maybe you're finding that you're drinking more than you want. Because it's like, "Well, one makes things special. Another will make it even more special." Maybe you just start having more chatter about how much you drink, or if you should have more. You will get to this place where you will feel stuck. It will feel like, "I just want to sit on the porch and enjoy the view. But if I don't have the drink, it really does feel like something is missing. And I don't want to feel like something is missing."

That is the place where people, because they don't have the framework of the archetypes to work with, and it's just a matter of discipline and willpower, why it can feel like you're just in this constant battle. And you don't need to be in this constant battle.

Let's talk about the think-feel-act cycle, and how it works with The Upgrade so that you can really understand not only what is happening in that moment, but also what your brain is learning. So, there you are, you're enjoying the view.

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And keep in mind, you did not always drink when you were enjoying a view. Just like you didn't always drink when you went to a party or you went out to dinner or you were at a celebration. Right? You didn't always drink when you're enjoying a view. I think that that is a key thing to remember.

Because it will feel like, "Well, I mean, obviously, it's just not possible, right? There is something missing without it." But it's important, with all the archetypes but I think The Upgrade in particular, to back up and remember there was a time when you could sit and admire the world around you, or go to a party or go out to dinner, and you were able to fully enjoy it.

It wasn't like the first time that you sat and admired the world around you someone was like, "Oh, you don't have anything to drink, you can't possibly be enjoying yourself without it." So, if we understand that that is true, how do we get to the place? How did we end up in the place where it's like now something feels missing without the drink?

The think-feel-act cycle really explains that. At some point, you were sitting there, you were taking in the view, and you may have had a thought like, "A drink will make this even better. A drink will make this even better." That thought could spark a little bit of desire. That's that feeling. Right? That little bit of desire like, "Ooh, a drink could make this even better."

And then, of course, our feelings are what motivate us to take action. So, you have the thought that a drink will make this even better. You have that little spark of desire. And now, here comes the action. I think a lot of times, when people start doing the work with the think-feel-act cycle, the default is just to be like, "Yeah, so then I went and had a drink."

But the action can refer to both what you do and what you don't do. So when you're looking at the think-feel-act cycle and you're learning how to use it as a tool, that action really can be both an action and an inaction. In this case, it's pretty obvious. You have the thought 'a drink will make this

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even better.' You feel that little spark of desire. You get up and you get yourself a drink, hoping that it's going to enhance your enjoyment. That's pretty obvious.

What is less obvious, but also extremely important, is what you're *not* doing. This is something that I work with people all the time when they're starting to learn to think-feel-act cycle and apply it in their own work. Let's really pinpoint what are you not doing. Yes, we know that you're getting up to get a drink. That action is very obvious. But are there inactions or things that you are avoiding doing?

And I think with The Upgrade, there are three inactions in particular that I see come up quite a bit. Again, these aren't the only ones, but I want to give you a sense for how this works. So, yes, you get up to get the drink. But there are things that you're also *not* doing, and this contributes to forming the habit. This contributes to what your brain learns.

For starters, you're probably not present in your body. This is really key. You're probably not present in your body that moment that you had that spark of desire. And I think this is important because we feel emotions as pleasurable sensations in the body.

But so often, what so many people find, not just with alcohol but with so many things, is that we feel this pleasurable sensation in the body. And instead of pausing to savor it, we immediately go to this place of, "How can I make this better?" Our attention immediately goes to, "I can find something. I can drink something. I can eat something. I can smoke something. I can buy something." We immediately go to, "How can I make this better?"

So, we actually develop the habit of not being present in our body with *pleasurable* emotions. I talk a lot on the podcast about wanting not to be present in our body with negative emotions. But people will be amazed,

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when they start doing this work, how often they aren't present in their body with pleasurable emotions. Because their attention is just like, "Ooh, got to find something better."

So, you're probably not present in your body. You're also probably not present in the moment. As soon as your brain is thinking about a future reward, you stop being in the here and now. Right? And that is a key piece. Because, again, the moment that you're thinking about a future reward, the moment that you step away from this present moment, you lose the capacity to really enjoy what is around you.

And not only to enjoy what is around you, but to find more to enjoy. There is always more to enjoy around you if you give it more attention. So, we're not present in the body. We're not present in the moment.

And then, I think another thing that I didn't even know was that this was something that you could do, that this was even possible, is you're not actually expanding the original positive emotion. Expanding your positive emotions is an amazing skill to have. It's something that I wish people had taught me when I was much younger. Instead of learning, I don't know, in my mid-30s, how to do this.

But you can expand what feels good by giving it more of your attention. You can do that by paying more attention to pleasurable sensations in your body. You can do that by giving more attention to pleasurable thoughts. Really thinking and considering about how lucky you are, grateful you feel, or how happy you are to be here in this moment looking at what you're looking, with the people that you're with.

You have that ability to expand positive emotions. But again, because most people, we're not present in our bodies, we're immediately going to this place of, "Yeah, let's find something to make it better." We're not present in that moment, so we're not even realizing there's more to enjoy. Most

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people don't have that tool of knowing that they can expand their positive emotions.

And so, notice how, yes, we had that thought, "A drink will make this even better." We had that little spark of desire. That spark of desire that may have motivated you to get up and go get the drink, or to place the order for the drink. And yes, that action is part of it. But there's also a series of what you're not doing. These inactions matter just as much as the act of drinking.

I will tell you this, when we talk about the think-feel-act cycle, we're not just ending with the action or inaction, we then are paying attention to, "Okay, if this is kind of the whole scope, framework, of what I did or didn't do, then what did my brain learn? What was my brain learning from all of this?" Because there is the short term of what happens, right? People will always want to say short term. It's like, "Okay, so then I have the drink." Or short term like, "It felt good."

But we have to also pay attention to the long term. So, maybe you have if that short-term result of your brain gets ahead of the feel-good hormone, dopamine. Yes, from the result of having a drink. But there's something happening in the long term as well. And when you really start to look at this and understand, what you will see with The Upgrade archetype is that in the long term, what will happen is that previously enjoyable situations start to feel lacking without alcohol.

The more you repeat this think-feel-act cycle unconsciously, which is what happens, right? We don't even realize that we're doing it. But it's happening behind the scenes even if we can't see it, and then we're repeating it over and over again. And soon, it will start to be that previously enjoyable situations will feel lacking without alcohol. And there are reasons why this is happening.

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For starters, you hear me talk about dopamine a lot on the podcast. The brain uses dopamine to remember and repeat pleasurable experiences that are important for survival. Now, keep in mind, alcohol, of course, is not needed for survival. But how the brain was designed, it was designed to use dopamine to remember and repeat experiences that were important for survival.

Of course, that may be how the brain was designed to work hundreds of thousands of years ago, but here we now are in our more modern environment.

So, the lower brain, I always like to remind you, has not caught up and still operating as if we are existing on the savannah, and it's really just paying attention to which one creates a larger dopamine response, right? "There's the dopamine response that I get from drinking. And there's a dopamine response that I get from taking in a beautiful view."

Alcohol is going to create a larger dopamine response because it's a more concentrated reward. So, what will happen, the lower brain will categorize alcohol as more important for survival. Even though we have a higher brain and we're able to see alcohol is not important for survival. It's not necessary for survival. In fact, it can get in the way of survival.

But the lower brain is just using the data point of the *size* of the dopamine response. So, what will happen? The urge to drink will be stronger than the urge to soak up the view, because alcohol creates a larger dopamine response. That piece is just important to remember. It's important to understand why it feels like a more powerful urge to have a drink and to repeat that, rather than soaking up the view.

In addition to that, as you repeat the behavior, whatever is connected with The Upgrade, whether it's beautiful views or parties, or celebrations or fancy restaurants, whatever it is, your brain is learning to associate these

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things with a high value reward. Right? It's always scanning 'hey, when is this high value reward coming?' It's like, "Oh, when we sit on the porch, that's when I get my glass of rosé. Oh, when we go out to a fancy restaurant."

So, your brain is learning to associate when it's going to get the high value reward. And over time, just thinking about these moments; thinking about the beautiful view, thinking about going to the restaurant, thinking about the party; can trigger a craving for alcohol. Because your lower brain is like, "A-ha, we're going to get this very important thing." It's remembering 'where I am going to get this really valuable, important reward.'

Your brain is learning where it's going to find these rewards. So, just thinking about them can trigger a craving. Your brain now also expects a high value reward in these situations. It did not always expect a high value reward when you went to a fancy restaurant, or when you sat out and looked at the view, or when you went to a party.

But now, as you have repeated the thoughts and the feelings connected with The Upgrade, now it begins to expect a high value reward in situations where you used to enjoy these situations without alcohol. So, understanding that the expectation is already there, that's really important.

Now, what happens when the expectation is there? If the expectation is there, and your lower brain is like, "Okay, this is good. I know what's going to happen. We're going to sit on the porch and we're going to get that glass of rosé. Because it's happened before and I remembered it." What do you think happens if your lower brain doesn't get that high value reward? What is going to happen in that moment?

I will tell you, your brain will experience what was previously a pleasurable situation as lacking. Something is missing. It's not the same. You will, whether consciously or unconsciously, start to believe that you can't enjoy

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previously pleasurable situations without alcohol. I want you to really think about that piece.

What will happen then, when you're starting to be like, "Oh, I don't think that I'm going to be able to enjoy it without it," then, if you get to the point where you decide that you want to change your relationship with alcohol and you want to cut back or you want to experiment with taking a month off or whatever, your brain is like, "No, no, no, we're supposed to get this reward."

And now you have this belief that the situation is going to be lacking without it. Not because it's actually lacking, but because your lower brain is expecting that reward. Then, if you want to change your relationship with alcohol, just contemplating that, contemplating what would that be like, the idea of just limiting yourself... Not even taking it away, just limiting yourself... may make you feel a little anxious or annoyed.

Again, simply because of how the lower brain was designed to really focus on the intensity of a reward, and to believe that that was important for survival. If you do try to abstain or moderate, what's going to happen? If you're like, "Okay, I just decided that I'm not going to drink," you are likely to go into that situation feeling a little negative.

I want you to think about this. For all of you that know you have The Upgrade archetype, and it's just like, "Yeah, drinking is just the thing that makes everything a little bit better, the party and the meal and whatever," see how you have now set yourself up unknowingly? You didn't know you were doing this. I didn't know I was doing this.

But you have set yourself up now, when you want to change, to go into the situation with a little bit of negative emotion. Because now it's like, "Ugh, it's not going to be as good."

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And when the lower brain senses a threat to a high value reward, what is going to happen? This is where it really feels like alcohol can kind of hijack your brain. Because what happens is your field of vision narrows. You will find that you kind of become hyper fixated on alcohol and everything else recedes into the background. And what I mean by this is, it's like you are there, but you're not fully there.

I can't even tell you the number of, I don't know, fancy dinners or vacations or parties or weddings, or just all these places where, for me, that upgrade was activated. Where it was like I couldn't take it in. I wasn't really even fully there, because I was so hyper fixated on alcohol. I was so hyper fixated on whether or not I was drinking and how much I was going to drink.

Because that lower brain was just like, "How much of this reward, that's really important for survival, am I going to get?" So, you're kind of setting yourself up with all of this. You're setting yourself up, kind of priming yourself, to drink more than you want to, right? Because you may be going into the situation with a negative emotion.

Your brain is kind of hyper fixated. It has a narrowing of its field of vision. You have all these unconscious beliefs that you don't even think are beliefs you just think are facts, like, 'it's just not as special without a drink.' And so, you're already going into the situation maybe feeling a little anxious or annoyed or deprived, before you even start drinking. If you feel deprived before you start drinking, guess what's going to happen? You're going to drink more.

So, all of this creates a perfect environment to reinforce the archetype. When you really understand what your brain is learning here, it's like, "Okay, well, either I abstain, and then it's just not enjoyable. Because I'm sitting there being like 'this just doesn't feel as special'."

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Or maybe you say that you're not going to drink, and then you give in and you find relief. It's just like, "Oh, thank God." Both scenarios the brain is going to use as "proof" that alcohol makes things better. When really, that's not what's going on.

What's really going on is it's kind of hijacking your brain, and it's stealing your capacity for enjoyment. Because notice with everything that I'm talking about, none of this is about being present in your body, or present in the moment, or really understanding how to expand that original positive emotion that you were feeling.

So, if you want to change your relationship with alcohol, if you want to drink class, if you want to stop drinking, when you start to build out that think-feel-act cycle, you start to see, "Oh yeah, willpower is going to be a slog." Because willpower is just going to war, right? It's just going to war with the cravings. Willpower is not about understanding what's happening underneath. It's just like gritting your teeth.

You can use willpower. You can use it to the high heavens in that Upgrade archetype. Even if you're not drinking, it will still be intact unless you start teaching the brain something new. Unless you start reframing all of what's happening here.

Realizing your brain has this tunnel vision... Not because alcohol is amazing, but because your lower brain thinks that it's important for survival. When, of course, we have a higher brain that knows nope, not the case. Realizing also the past attempts to change, when you have tried to maybe cut back or you have tried to say no and it hasn't worked, you can also see that your past attempts may have actually *reinforced* the archetype.

They may be now used as proof by the brain. "See, alcohol does make everything better." Realizing that you need to actually work at building the muscle of bringing your brain back to the current moment, bringing yourself

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back to the here and now, practicing being in your body, learning how to expand pleasurable emotions on your own without immediately needing to consume something.

Those are all skills that you need to develop. All of this work is needed, in conjunction with learning how to manage your cravings. So, yes, it's important to learn how to manage your cravings, and to start to approach them from a place... to see that you don't have to go to war with them. But you need the work of the archetype that has been activated. That really works together to create this change.

I will tell you this, it is so much easier than you might think. Today is just a little sample of how we can kind of dig in and look and see. "Hey, what is the think-feel-act cycle going on here?" But when you start to really do it, not only does it reframe what your brain is learning, but you start to see "Oh, it this is not just about being more disciplined. This is not just about me getting better at saying no. I actually have to build these skills, these pieces, that I may have not even realized that I was doing."

Because you didn't realize that the action was more than just getting up and getting a drink. It was also everything that you weren't doing. So, that's The Upgrade.

We're going to be talking about The Connector next time. Which is all about using alcohol as a way to kind of cement or create emotional bonds. And over the next couple of weeks, I'm going to be going through each of the Drink Archetypes and really breaking out how they work with the think-feel-act cycle.

But for those of you who know you have The Upgrade... And again, if you're unsure, if you haven't taken the quiz, you can take it at DrinkType.com. But if you know you have The Upgrade, try seeing what

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your think-feel-act cycle looks like. Remember, I just gave you one example here.

This is not the only thought, the only feeling, or the only set of actions or inactions that can happen. But try to see what is your go-to thought when you're drinking to elevate the situation? What is the kind of feeling that you notice bubbling up inside of you? That is the feeling before you reach for the drink or you go get up to get one.

And more importantly, just beyond getting a drink, what aren't you doing? When you hear me talk about everything that we can do to really do the work of being more present in our body, and with our pleasurable emotions and sensations, and expanding pleasurable feelings, what aren't you doing? Maybe it's just simply as you're just not in the here and now. Right? You're just not in that present moment.

Spend some time considering this, considering how The Upgrade shows up for you, and it really will show you the best place to focus your energy if you want to create lasting change and unravel this archetype.

Alright everybody, that's it for today. I will see you next week.

Hey guys, you already know that drinking less has plenty of health benefits. But did you know that the work you do to change your relationship with alcohol will help you become more of the person you want to be in every part of your life?

Learning how to manage your brain and your cravings is an investment in your physical, emotional and personal wellbeing. And that's exactly what's waiting for you when you join my membership Take a Break. Whether you want to drink less, drink rarely, or not at all, we'll help you figure out a relationship with alcohol that works for you. We'll show you why rules, drink

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plans, and Dry January so often fail, and give you the tools you need to feel in control and trust yourself.

So, head on over to RachelHart.com and sign up today, because changing the habit is so much easier when you stop trying to go it alone.