

Ep #394: Why Do I Have So Much Chatter About Alcohol?



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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 394.

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. We are talking today about a question that I get a lot, why do I have so much chatter in my brain about alcohol and about drinking? And I will tell you, I so relate to this question and this struggle because I used to be inundated with all the chatter.

So we're going to talk today about why this happens, what you can do about it, and I really want to help you understand what is and is not realistic when it comes to quieting some of this chatter in your mind.

Now, what do I mean by chatter? I mean all of the thinking that you do about drinking. All of the internal back and forth about whether or not to drink, or whether or not to have more. All of the questions the next day about why you drank, and why you can't learn your lesson, and why you had more than you wanted to, and why you can't keep your commitment.

I mean, when you feel like you are stuck in a relationship with alcohol that doesn't feel good to you, when you are confused on why you watch yourself repeat unwanted behaviors, even when you have lots and lots of evidence for why it would be better for you to change, what you will find is that when you're stuck, your brain will devote a lot of mental energy to thinking about alcohol and thinking about drinking.

So whether you are looking forward to the drink, or debating about how much you should have, or guiltig yourself for giving in, or guiltig yourself

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for saying no... and then of course, all of the drama the next day... this is what I'm talking about when it comes to chatter.

Truthfully, yes, you know hangovers suck for sure. But I really think all of this mental energy that we spend, all of the thinking, that is something that just really wears on you. It wore on me. I knew I just didn't want to think this much about alcohol. I didn't want to think this much about drinking. I didn't want to spend so much mental energy on this topic.

And that really, really wore at me as the years went by. I just found myself unable to change. The good news, of course, is that you *can* change. You can do a lot to change the amount of chatter that you have. But here's the other fascinating thing, it's really not connected to how much you drink.

So one of the first things I want to help you understand is why you're inundated with so much chatter. The first reason lies in how the brain is structured. I've talked about this on the podcast before. Your brain is not one big lump. It's an incredibly complex organ with many different parts and many different functions.

But for our purposes, for what you need to know, if you want to change your drinking, what you need to know is that the brain has two main areas: the lower brain and the higher brain. The lower brain is the oldest and most primitive structure in the brain. It controls your body's basic functions. Its primary goal is to keep you alive. And it accomplishes this using a very simple program — find and remember the easiest and most efficient ways to obtain pleasure in your environment and avoid pain.

In other words, that lower brain, it's always on the hunt for rewards. And alcohol is a reward for the brain. So some of the chatter that you have right now is simply your lower brain at work. Remember, it's trying to remember where is it going to find those rewards. It's trying to remind you when these moments come up.

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So maybe you're like, "Hey, the workday is over, it's time for a drink. It's the weekend, it's time to drink. We're going to turn on the game, it's time to drink." Everyone has different triggers, but you get the point. The lower brain is designed to find and remember rewards in your environment.

And once it starts to connect the dots, once it learns the situations in which you drink and it gets a reward, it will start reminding you to go get that reward. So that's a piece of all the chatter that's happening.

Now, thankfully, we are not just our lower brain. You have a higher brain too. It is the newest, most evolved part of the human brain. It has many of the functions that we associate with being human — the ability to reason, apply logic, weigh pros and cons, bring ideas to life, and also to change our behaviors.

Unlike the lower brain, your higher brain is operating using a different program. It doesn't just care about the present moment. It doesn't just care about rewards. It cares about tomorrow. It cares about your future. It cares about the big picture of your life. This is a part of your brain that can set goals and help you reach your potential.

Like I said, it's the part that you need to activate in order to examine, understand, and ultimately change your drinking. This is the part of your brain that you're bringing to this podcast right now.

Now, when it comes to drinking, these two parts of the brain, they are often in conflict. What your lower brain wants right now, a reward, is not necessarily aligned with the goals you have for your future self. But I think it's really important for all of you to know that feeling of being out of alignment with yourself is very, very, very normal.

Having this kind of internal conflict is not a sign that you have a problem. It's a sign that you have a human brain. Just like we have a lot of internal

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conflict about what to eat, whether we should keep working or we should rest, or whether to buy the new shiny thing that we want or save money for a rainy day. Internal conflict is the price that we all pay for having the advantages of a human brain.

So one of my goals is really helping you learn how to use the higher brain to override the impulsive and compulsive nature of the lower brain. In essence, really discovering how to live your life based on wisdom rather than animal instinct.

But listen, you're never going to completely get rid of this internal conflict. Internal conflict comes with having your brain. Now, you can do a lot, a lot, a lot to quiet all of this chatter and quiet the conflict, partly just by dropping your resistance to it, right? Instead of hating the chatter, you're going to be curious about it.

Now you can also quiet the chatter in your brain simply by removing the reward. In other words, simply by no longer drinking. Remember though, and this piece is really important, your lower brain, it doesn't want to be inefficient. It doesn't want to pine after something that you have shown day after day, week after week, month after month, year after year, you're not going to say yes to, right? That would be inefficient for the lower brain.

But I think it's important to be really clear about this mechanism. Because just because you say no, you may quiet some chatter, but you're not going to quiet all of it unless you're doing the work that I'm talking about here. Because if you have listened to this podcast, if you have read my book, you have heard me talk about how I had several periods in my early twenties where I would abstain from drinking for long periods of time, but I still had lots and lots of chatter about it.

Now I didn't necessarily have a lot of the lower brain chatter about, "Oh, it's the weekend, so now I'm going to drink. It's the end of the day, so let's stop

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by the liquor store.” I got to a point where a lot of that chatter started to subside, but I still had a lot of drama about my decision to say no. I still had a lot of drama about my past and why it was hard for me and why did I even need to be someone who wasn't drinking, right?

I had taught my lower brain that certain triggers in my environment were no longer something that I rewarded with alcohol, but I did very little, next to nothing, to clean up all the drama I had. And this drama, this piece that I want to talk about, it really is actually the domain of your higher brain.

Yes, your higher brain, which I talk about all the time on the podcast, is here to help you. You can harness its power to change your habits, change your life. All of this is true, but the higher brain is also where you are socialized. It is where you learn the rules of society, about what you're supposed to do and what you're not supposed to do, what's normal and what's abnormal.

So the higher brain is a place where you can dream and envision your future and you can change who you are. But here's the thing, if you don't know how to harness your higher brain, it may just be running on the program of how you were socialized, right? If you don't know how to harness the power of your higher brain, you might just be imagining a future that's, frankly, not so great.

For instance, I had this idea for a long time, probably like, I don't know, 98% of people that I work with come to this work with some form of this kind of socialization; that it's normal to drink. Drinking is normal. That's what normal people do, right? And not drinking, that's not normal. That's weird or abnormal.

What I want you to consider is that you did not come out of the womb with a brain that was programmed to believe this. You came out of the womb with a brain that was programmed to seek rewards, for sure. You did not

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come out... You were not born with a brain that had preconceived notions about alcohol and how it connected to what is normal and what is not normal.

These ideas that we have about what is normal and what is not are thoughts that you were socialized to believe, right? But socialization happens in this totally unconscious way. A lot of times we don't even realize that they're thoughts. We just think, "No, this is just how the world is."

But I always, especially when we're doing the work around these socialized beliefs that we have around alcohol, I always think it's kind of a fun thought experiment to imagine yourself growing up on a deserted island, right? So it's just you growing up there. Your concept of normal and abnormal would be very different.

In fact, you might not even have that concept, certainly not in comparison to others, because there wouldn't be others to compare yourself with. So you might observe the weather and think, "Huh, that storm was out of ordinary compared with the weather that we get most days." Or you might observe your body when you're sick and think, "Huh, my body feels different right now than I feel on most days."

So you'd certainly observe differences, but it's very unlikely that you would be attaching these labels that we have so much baggage around, right? Being like, "Oh, this is normal. This is when I'm normal and I'm like everybody else. And this is when I'm abnormal and something's wrong with me."

And certainly, while you may observe differences, you wouldn't be trying to prove that you're normal or that nothing is wrong with you because you wouldn't even have that concept, right? You might have the concept of

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‘something feels different right now,’ but not the concept of ‘I think I'm broken on the inside.’

So much of people's desire to drink less... I think this is really important... so much of this is often a proxy for wanting to feel secure that you're not weird or abnormal or that there's nothing wrong with you. And I just think it's really important for you to acknowledge, if that may be a piece of what is driving you.

It wasn't a small piece; it was a big piece of what was driving me. And just acknowledging that, that can help to reduce the chatter. And here's why. Because we start to then go back and understand, “Huh, okay, well, normal and abnormal, these aren't concepts that we're born with. They're ideas that we're socialized to believe.”

But why? Why do so many people have this really strong desire to want to be normal or to fit in? And the answer is because it serves an evolutionary purpose. Being accepted as a member of the tribe increased your chances for survival millions of years ago. We didn't have to go back that far, right? We could just go back 1,000 years or 500 years ago.

If you were cast out from your community, that would make your ability to stay safe, your ability to find shelter, your ability to get food, that would make it all that much more difficult.

So I always like to remind myself that when part of me goes down the “compare and despair” path... and listen guys, it still happens, right?... when part of me goes down that path, then I see another part of me wanting to swoop in and be like, “Oh my God, Rachel, really? Still? What? You're going to turn 44 this year and you're still comparing yourself to others and worrying that you don't measure up?”

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We may have this other part of us that has been socialized to believe that we should just grow out of this. But I remind myself, “Oh wait,” knowing my place in the hierarchy, being able to look around at other people's behaviors and see that mine were similar, that was about security and safety. That has an evolutionary purpose.

So no, you're not just going to grow out of millions of years of evolution because you think it's silly to “compare and despair”. In fact, one of the most powerful things that you can do is acknowledge how human this is, right? How normal it is for you to do this.

And like so much of what I teach, just by observing, observing how you want to go to the place of what is and is not normal with drinking, or what is and is not weird around not drinking, just by observing those thoughts, noticing them without judgment but bringing curiosity, rather than either rushing to change it or just believing it without questioning it, if you can do that, you will actually start to find that these thoughts will naturally subside that “compare and despair” knee jerk.

By reminding yourself, “Hey, there's an evolutionary purpose going on here. This is not just a matter of me ‘should have grown out of it by now.’” That will take away some of the intensity. Just like we do with our cravings, right? This is a very similar technique to what I teach with cravings.

So you have all this socialization about what it means to drink and what it means not to drink and what it means to be someone who struggles with their drinking. And a lot of this socialization can create so much of your internal chatter. And one of the things that I help people do, and I want you to consider doing, is deciding on purpose what you want to make these things mean.

What do you want to make it mean if you or someone else drinks? What do you want to make it mean if you decide to stop? Or if you just decide, “Hey,

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I'm not drinking tonight. Hey, I've had enough."? What do you want to make it mean if you have struggled with your drinking?

If you're like me, I wasn't choosing what I wanted to make any of these things mean. I was just adapting all of the thoughts that I had been socialized to think, right? In other words, "It's normal to drink. It's weird or no fun if you don't drink. And if you struggle, it means something is wrong with you."

I mean, I just adopted all of that and believed it to be the truth for the longest time, right? There's nothing wrong with having a goal to drink less. And there's also nothing morally superior about not drinking. But either way, you have to do the work about what you want to decide to think about alcohol. And think about drinking on purpose, rather than using your goal as a proxy to prove that nothing is wrong with you.

Because trust me, that is going to backfire. If your brain is good at pointing out what makes you different from others, and not in a positive way, or what makes you different from the crowd, then changing your drinking, you're not going to change that thought pattern. You're not going to change that pattern of, "Oh, something's wrong with me. Something inside of me is different or broken."

You've got to do that work. And I just want to add here, changing your ideas about alcohol and drinking also means learning how to be okay with other people thinking something vastly different. I am not here on a crusade to make everyone have the same thoughts about alcohol and drinking.

I'm on a crusade to help you decide what you want to think, to choose these thoughts on purpose, and also to make peace with other people having different thoughts. If you can only feel good if everybody's thoughts line up with your own, you're in for a world of trouble.

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So some of the chatter is about your socialization, and you can really do the work to completely change this area. This is an area where I'm like, "Listen, if you have a lot of internal chatter here, this is a place that you can 100% clean up doing the work with the think-feel-act cycle."

Some of the chatter is also about how you may be currently envisioning your future, right? This, by the way, this is a place where I would be so frustrated with my drinking, and so frustrated with how much I was drinking. I'd wake up and I'd feel regretful and I'd feel physically terrible and emotionally awful. And I was still really clinging to it.

I was still like really clinging to, "Yeah, but it's really important to me." Why was I clinging so intensely? This is where the Drink Archetypes™ come in. The Drink Archetypes are all about what the drink represents to your brain, these unconscious beliefs.

So if your brain learned, "Hey, drinking is how you're an adult;" if you don't do the work to challenge this, you're going to envision a future where saying no always leaves you sitting at the proverbial "kids' table", which is no fun. If your brain learned that drinking facilitates connection; if you don't do the work here, you're going to envision a future where saying no means feeling disconnected to who you're with. I mean, the list goes on here.

One of the things that I think is most powerful about the Drink Archetypes is understanding how the ability to moderate or abstain from alcohol, these things are stymied by the Drink Archetypes because there is this deeper, often very unseen desire at work. It's not always obvious, right?

And so often we're just like, "Oh, why can't I moderate? Why can't I just say no?" Again, we want to turn it into 'something wrong with me,' not understanding that we have these conflicting desires that are essentially preventing us from succeeding at our goal.

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So this is another area when it comes to the future that you're envisioning. This is another area where you are really completely in charge of cleaning up all the chatter.

I will say, if you're new to my work, if you're new to the podcast, go find out your primary and secondary drink archetypes. If you don't know them, go to drinktype.com and you can take the quiz for free and get your results. It will help you so much as you're doing this work.

And finally, the last area where you may have a lot of chatter is because you may have unintentionally fed into a binge-and-restrict cycle with alcohol. What I want you to consider is the things that we use to reward ourselves, we just as often turn around and use against ourselves, use to punish ourselves, right?

So if you've ever woken up with a hangover and then told yourself, "Oh my God, I am not allowed to drink anymore," you have engaged in withholding alcohol as a form of punishment. And now, listen, you might be like, "But Rachel, I feel awful. This hangover feels awful. I am embarrassed about last night and I don't want to repeat this behavior."

But there's a difference between trying to understand what happened and figuring out the skills that you need to create a different outcome, versus "I was bad. I should be ashamed of myself, and I need to punish myself in order to teach me a lesson."

I will tell you, I was engaged in so much of this in my twenties and thirties. It was almost like I was taking away the "privilege" of drinking. Because I would wake up and think, "Oh God, Rachel, you're so stupid. I forbid you to do that again." But you guys, if you've done this, you know how well this works, right? It's not great.

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Because when you turn alcohol into something that you're not allowed to have, what happens? You are bound to fixate on it and want it more. So restricted binge cycles, they can also show up in your particular patterns around drinking. Some of you guys listening out there will kind of “save up” your drinks for the weekend, so your brain is used to getting a lot of reward at once.

And sometimes your drinking may trigger the opposite reaction. So when you over drink, instead of telling yourself, “No, you're not allowed to have it,” ... This may be a kind of reason for you to give up... It's like, “Well, I'm never going to figure this out and I can't change. So I might as well just let me be me.”

I often have this kind of version of, “Well, if I'm this messed up, I might as well just enjoy right now and have a drink.” Or you may also wake up and decide that the only way to feel better when you have a hangover is to have “hair of the dog”, to drink. Which, by the way, does not work. But a lot of times what people will find is that over drinking will actually just lead to more drinking.

And one of the things that I really work on with people, when it comes to understanding how the binge-and-restrict cycle can show up for them, is really helping people recalibrate. What's going to happen if you decide on purpose to increase how much you want to drink? Maybe for a weekend, maybe for a night, maybe for a week.

I have a lot of examples where people will successfully cut back on their drinking during the week. That's a really important goal for them. But then maybe they have a vacation or a wedding coming up and they decide, “You know what? I want to drink more,” ... which, by the way, is a totally okay choice to make.

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I think as long as you know why you're making the choice, as long as you feel good about your reason, you like your reason, then yeah, I mean, you're in charge of you. But I help people really understand, "Okay, well, let's just be aware of how the brain works and some of the consequences." Not because, 'oh, there are consequences, so therefore you shouldn't do it,' but just so we go into it with open eyes. So I'm talking about consequences beyond just, "Oh, I might feel hung over the next day."

I was coaching someone really recently on this who now drinks very little in her day-to-day life. This is a huge shift, a huge change and accomplishment for her. She had a wedding weekend and she decided that she wanted to drink more. So she decided she was going to have three drinks every night during that celebration.

She got back home from the weekend, and she was kind of like, "Hey, it went well, right? I did it, and I stuck to my commitment." But she got home and she was like, "But now I've got all this chatter." Her brain, her lower brain was like, "Okay, so this is what we're doing now again? We're doing three drinks a night? This is what we get?"

And part of what I coached her on and helped her recognize was that this was not a problem. That increased chatter after the decision to drink more, it didn't mean that she had gone backwards or that all her work that she had done was for naught. It's simply a feature of how the brain works.

Your lower brain is all about remembering where it can find rewards. So if you significantly cut back, and then make the decision to suddenly increase your drinking, your lower brain is going to get all excited that this is a new normal. And so, when I was coaching her, it really just helped for her to recognize that her increased desire did not mean that something had gone wrong.

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It did not mean that all her work was for nothing. It was going to eventually subside as long as she didn't listen to it. But knowing this piece, knowing that you're very likely going to have to deal with increased desire after making the decision to drink more, this is actually very normal. It's not a sign that anything has gone wrong.

It's part of what you need to factor in when you're making the choice. Simply to be aware that it may happen so you have the tools at your disposal, so you don't just turn increased desire into increased drinking, right? And so often we engage in this kind of binge-and-restrict cycle unconsciously.

You can start to be much more conscious around this, and make decisions, if you understand what's the full picture of what may unfold here. So when it comes to the chatter connected to your binge-and-restrict patterns, I think that you can significantly turn down the volume, but you're not going to erase it entirely. Especially if you're going to keep alcohol in your life. And that's okay.

You don't need to erase all the internal chatter in order to be successful. In fact, trying to make that your goal, guess what? It only leads to more chatter. Because when you start having all the thoughts about alcohol and drinking, if now that's a problem, you're going to attach anxiety and hopelessness to these thoughts when they appear. And neither of those things are, frankly, helpful or necessary.

So just as a recap, you've got a lot of chatter about alcohol and about drinking in part because of your lower brain, in part because of socialization, in part because of the drink archetypes, and in part because of any kind of unconscious binge-and-restrict cycles that you may fall into.

Some of this can actually be totally eliminated, but I want you to know that you're never going to completely silence the internal chatter. And by the

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way, that you don't need to. When the chatter comes up for me, and that's really few and far between now... but it still does come up... when it comes up for me, I use it as an opportunity to get to know myself better. To tap into the wisdom of the cravings rather than going to war with myself, or making it mean that something is wrong with me, something is broken inside of me, and I'm never going to feel whole.

All right, that's it for today, my friends. 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 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.

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