

Ep #396: When You're Drinking to Fill the Time



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Rachel Hart

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You are listening to the *Take a Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, Episode 396.

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.

All right, everybody, welcome back. Today we are going to revisit one of my very, very favorite episodes that I recorded way back in 2018, I think. It's called "Time Alone". And if you haven't heard this episode, it is really an important one for everyone to listen to regardless of your drink archetypes.

The "Time Alone" episode is going to be great for people with the Hourglass Archetype, which is all about pouring a drink as a way to kind of pass the time. But the fact of the matter is that the ability, the skill to spend time alone with just you and your thoughts, to actually learn how to enjoy that, is a huge thing that will help you no matter what drink archetype you have. This skill is so overlooked and it is so important.

So let's go back together, go back into the archives, re-listen to this episode. You're also going to hear about one of my all-time favorite children's books that really helped instill for me a belief in why being alone and spending time on your own is not only important but can be really amazing. All right, everybody, enjoy.

Now, my first question for you is this: do you like to be alone? Do you like to spend time just with yourself? And I'm not talking about being by yourself and listening to the podcast, or being by yourself and watching TV, or on your phone. I'm talking about time by yourself, with no distractions. No TV, no cell phone, no computer, no internet, no radio, no books, no magazines, no Candy Crush, no social media, nothing. Right?

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This is a really important question for you to answer. Do you like to be alone with yourself? I will tell you that the more I work with people to help them change their drinking, the more I understand just how powerful the ability to be alone with yourself figures into the ability to change the habit of drinking, it's such an important component.

And I will tell you that personally, I've watched this with myself as well. I've seen how developing and honing my own ability to be alone with myself has radically transformed my life. So this is what we're going to talk about today, what being alone really means, why it is a problem for some of you to be alone just by yourself with no distractions, the ways in which you may try to escape being alone, and why having a low tolerance for solitude gets in the way of changing the habit of drinking.

Not only that, but we're also going to talk about how to start cultivating alone time as a skill for yourself, because it is such an important skill to cultivate and develop.

So first I want to talk about the time when you are alone, identifying when are you by yourself, when are you alone? Now, some of you, especially those of you with young kids are going to say, "Look I'm never alone, I'm always with someone, there's always someone around." And if you are one of those people, I want you to really challenge yourself to identify when you are alone. There are times. Really challenge yourself on this front.

And on the other end of the spectrum, there are going to be some of you out there who feel like you are always alone, you are always by yourself, and if that is your case, I totally understand. For a long time, this was me.

I remember certain points living in New York City, I was in my early thirties, I was single, I was living on my own, and there were times, there were weekends when from Friday night when I left work until Monday morning when I returned to that same workplace, I really truly felt like I was all by myself.

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Obviously, I was living in a city of eight million people, and I wasn't just staying in my apartment the whole time, I was out and about in the world, but you know, I was out and about around strangers. And so really from Friday evening to Monday morning, it was just me, and that was really a struggle for me especially because at that point in my life, I really struggled with being alone, being by myself. Solitude was not something that I enjoyed; it was not something that I sought out.

So no matter where you fall on this spectrum, whether or not you're thinking to yourself, "Look, I really don't have any time alone, I don't have any time to myself", or "I have way too much, all I have is alone time", I want you to think about the moments in your life that you are to some degree by yourself. And now maybe this is because literally no one else is around, or it might be because the people that are around you are strangers.

So here are some examples. It can be commuting to work, driving in the car, or riding public transportation. You can be alone when you're standing in line or waiting, right? So maybe when you're at the grocery store, the drugstore, or waiting at the doctor's office, when you're getting ready in the morning, when you're showering, when you're getting dressed, when you're brushing your teeth, even when you're going to the bathroom.

When you're doing any kind of household chores, cooking, folding laundry, vacuuming, picking up. Or it can be actually when you're in bed at night, either before you fall asleep or if you wake up in the middle of the night. You know, if you do have someone that you sleep next to, if you wake up in the middle of the night and that person is asleep, you can still feel very alone.

So with that list, and there's others that you can probably think of, but I want you to start to identify some of the times when you are alone, and ask yourself this: what are you usually doing? Are you distracting yourself? Are you filling the space, filling the time in any way? Are you on your phone? Are you listening to the radio? Are you scrolling through Facebook?

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What are you usually doing when you're alone? This is a really important question for you to have awareness around. Are you ever just allowing yourself to be just with yourself, uninterrupted, not doing anything, just being with you?

Now, most of you are going to discover that when you think about the time that you're by yourself, you're usually engaging in some sort of distraction, and I'll tell you this was me too. The idea that I could just be by myself not doing anything, just me, myself and I, it really never crossed my mind. I was always doing something. I was always filling in that time. I was always looking for a distraction.

And what I want you to think about is why is that? Why do so many people feel the need to fill the time when they are by themselves? The answer is this: when you are alone without any distractions, it's just you and your thoughts, and the very first indication that you don't have a lot of positive thoughts running through your mind is if when you are alone you are always trying to keep your mind occupied.

You are always looking for a distraction. Now, remember how the think-feel-act cycle works. This is really important. Being alone, being by yourself, not doing anything, not having any distractions, all of that is neutral. Being alone doesn't feel like anything. It's not good or bad or enjoyable or interminable until you think a thought. That's how the think-feel-act cycle works.

You know, I was talking to one of my clients recently, and she told me about this amazing study. It blew my mind when she told me about it, where people were asked in the study to entertain themselves with their own thinking. Entertain themselves with their thoughts, no distraction, for up to 15 minutes. So they were by themselves in a room, asked to entertain themselves just with their thinking. And afterwards, they had to rate how difficult it was to be alone with just their thoughts.

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Now, here's the thing. Not only did a majority of people find it difficult, but they also reported that just 15 minutes alone with their thoughts was un-enjoyable. I want you to really let that sink in. A majority of people in this study found that spending 15 minutes alone with their thoughts was not only difficult, but also un-enjoyable. Think about the implications of that for a moment. Think about the implications of that in your own life.

Now, knowing the think-feel-act cycle, it's immediately clear why people would report that being alone with their thoughts was difficult and un-enjoyable, because if you have a lot of negative thinking, you're going to be producing a lot of negative emotions, right?

But so many of us don't even tune into what's running through our mind, we're not even paying attention to our thoughts. All we know is just, "I don't like being by myself. I don't like being alone without any distractions, doesn't feel good." Right? We're not even paying attention to why that is because of all the thoughts that are running through our mind.

And once you realize that, it's really no wonder why you don't want to be left alone with your own thoughts, because negative thoughts produce negative emotions. And when you're alone without any distraction, it's just you focusing on your thinking, and then how you're feeling.

When you start spending time alone, you discover the automatic habitual thoughts that are on repeat. You discover where your brain goes, where your mind goes when there's nothing to distract it, when there's nothing to entertain it. And for too many of you listening, where your brain goes is not a pretty place.

Most people will discover that their automatic habitual thinking is not all that pretty. That's what I discovered when I started doing this work. Thoughts like, "I'm so behind. I can never catch up. There's too much to do. I wish I didn't have to go to work. Why am I alone? Why isn't there someone in my life? There's so much drudgery. Things never let up. What am I doing with my life?"

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Do any of these sound familiar? Think about these thoughts and how they work in the think-feel-act cycle and how they're going to make you feel. So when you're by yourself, you have no distractions, your automatic and habitual thoughts kick in, they're pretty negative, you're not going to be feeling very positive.

So here's the thing. The study gets even more interesting. I love the second piece of it. So the researchers did the initial test, they had people in a room by themselves for 15 minutes, they could only be entertained by their thinking, and then report back on how that was. But afterwards, the researchers wired up the participants to a device that would deliver an electric shock. I know, right? Of course there's an electric shock involved in this.

Anyway, so they decided we're going to run the test again, but this time we're going to make it a little different. Before people go into that room by themselves, they're going to be wired up with this device, and we're going to give them a shock before they go into the room so they can know what it feels like to get the shock. And now all the participants, once they're in the room, they have the ability to shock themselves if they want.

And it won't be because of curiosity because we will have already showed them before going into the room what it feels like. So they wired everybody up, they gave them a shock, then they asked them, "Hey, what was that shock like? Did you like it? Would you pay money not to feel that shock again?"

They collected all that data and they sent people back into the room, back into the room for 15 minutes to sit by themselves, entertain themselves with their thinking, and if they wanted to, they could shock themselves. Now, this is what is so crazy, but makes so much sense when you think about it when you find out the results of this study.

Of the people in the study who said after receiving the first shock before they went into the room, they told researchers that they would pay money

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not to have to feel that shock again, when they were left alone with their thoughts in the room for just 15 minutes, a quarter of men and two thirds of men made the decision to shock themselves. Can you believe this? An electric shock that they had already said, "You know what, I don't like it, I would pay money not to have to feel that again."

But when they were by themselves in a room all alone for 15 minutes, and all they could do was entertain themselves with their own thinking, they decided it was more worthwhile to self-administer a shock to themselves. This is so crazy. It really is, but it really got me thinking, what does it say about most people's ability to be alone with their mind?

And here's the thing. If you're starting to think about this for the very first time and you're realizing, "Hey, you know what, I don't really like being alone. I don't like not having some sort of distraction." The question then is what are you willing to do to not feel that way? What are you willing to do, what are you willing to sacrifice so that you don't have to feel that way?

This is such a big component for many people of the habit of pouring a glass of wine or cracking open a beer. It's such a big component of the habit of drinking. Feeling bored or lonely in the evenings and then using a drink to solve how you feel in many ways, it's very similar to that study, right? And the thing is that you don't have to just be by yourself.

Sometimes you can feel very lonely when you're with a group of people, and so then having a drink is a good way to produce a connection that otherwise wouldn't be there. It's a good way to give your brain a lot of dopamine and make your brain think that it's really enjoying this situation that it actually isn't.

And that's why changing the habit of drinking can be really challenging, because if you take alcohol out, but you don't understand the think-feel-act cycle, you don't understand why it's so unenjoyable to be alone with your thoughts, why it's so difficult, then you just feel stuck, right?

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Then you're just kind of in this place of like, "Well, I don't know, I feel unhappy with the results that I'm getting from my drinking, but I also feel unhappy when I'm by myself in the evening. If I'm out with a group of people and I just feel totally lonely, even though I'm with other people, so I'm also unhappy, so then what do I do?"

The truth is this. There is a big, a very big difference between being alone and being lonely, or being bored. Alone is just a fact, right? It's just a fact of you being without another. It's neutral. Loneliness and boredom, these are emotions created by your negative thoughts that usually negative thoughts about the fact that you are alone. There is a big difference there.

And so when a lot of people say, "I don't like being alone", what they're really saying is "I don't like the emotions that I experience when I am alone." There is a really big difference between these two things. And so I want you to really question this for yourself. How do you feel about your time alone?

And if you don't feel great about it, then you have to start the process of discovering why you aren't enjoying your time alone. And the answer is always what you are thinking. The answer is always the quality of your thoughts that are just automatically and habitually running through your mind when all of a sudden you have no distractions, and the question for you is, are they high quality thoughts or are they low quality thoughts?

The biggest indicator of this, the biggest indicator of whether – of the quality of your thoughts is the simple question, do you like being completely alone, undisturbed with just you and your thoughts? If the quality of your thinking is poor, you're going to be looking for distractions. You're going to be looking for ways to divert your attention. If it is not, if the quality of your thinking is high, you're not going to mind being alone.

And I will tell you, I love this idea, I love thinking about the quality of your thoughts, the quality of your thinking, because so many of us pay a lot of attention to the quality of your food, the quality of what we're purchasing,

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the quality of what we're consuming, right? But we don't ever stop and think about the quality of the thoughts that are running through our minds. And a lot of us have junk food thoughts, a lot of us have thoughts that are no good for us, they are not sustaining, they are low quality.

But in order for you to discover this, you have to be willing to spend some time alone on purpose, without distraction. You have to just allow yourself to see what automatically comes up in your mind when you don't have a distraction. Where does your thinking automatically go to?

Notice, are you thinking things like, "I should really be doing something", "I should be more productive", "This is silly, why am I doing this?" Or even, "This isn't how I want my life to look. Why am I at this job? Why am I with this partner?" Right? Just notice where that automatic thinking goes, what direction does it head in?

And then look at these thoughts, you can look at them as an objective observer and ask yourself, "Okay, I understand the think-feel-act cycle, so what feelings are these thoughts creating for me?" But you have to start cultivating time with yourself on purpose.

When do you cultivate being alone in your life, if ever? When do you say, "Hey, you know what, I'm going to practice spending time with just me and my thoughts, see what's in there, check out the quality of my thinking"? This is something you can do, and it doesn't have to be for huge stretches of time. You can do this in small simple ways, but you have to start cultivating it.

So first understand your thoughts about being alone. Like, before you even look at what's in your mind, ask yourself, what do you think about being alone? Do you think that it is some sort of special time that can be cultivated and can help you grow as a person? Or do you think it's a waste? It's time that needs to be filled with doing something.

You know, I was thinking about this a lot when I was preparing for this podcast, and I was remembering that even though I personally have

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struggled a lot with time on my own, I always had a sense that alone time, time to myself was supposed to be something special. It was supposed to be something that I could treasure and enjoy.

And I was trying to remember why this was, and I remembered a book that my mom used to read to me when I was a little girl. I love this book so much, and I hadn't thought about it in a really long time. It's called *Bear by Himself* by Geoffrey Hayes, and I don't know why I loved it so much as a little kid, but I really did.

And the entire book – you know, it's a book for very young kids, it's a celebration of time spent on your own. It's hard to find it in print anymore, but you know, I'm telling you, if you're looking for a wonderful children's book, this is the one. And my mom, whenever I would have trouble sleeping, she would read this book to me.

Which of course, I mean, it's such a perfect moment to do it because when you are sleeping, when you wake up in the middle of the night, when you're by yourself in your room, it's such a crucial skill. It's such a crucial time to learn the skill of being alone. And so that was what my mom chose for me. She chose this book, *Bear by Himself*, and it has such a beautiful opening.

I actually asked her when I was preparing for this podcast because I don't have a copy. I asked her if she would scan it and send it to me so I could remind myself of it. But I remember these words so vividly. "There are times when a bear has to be alone with himself, to think his own thoughts and sing his own songs."

Now, let me tell you, I was really tempted to read the entire book to you guys because I love it so much and I think it's so beautiful, but I mean, that just gives you a sense of it, right?

This idea that you can actually celebrate being alone, that it's this really beautiful time and I think that having that book read to me as a child over and over again, there – it lodged something inside of me, it lodged this

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idea, or it created this idea that alone time is this really special time and sometimes you need it, with no distractions, just to be with yourself.

And it really stayed with me, this idea that being alone, it wasn't a waste, it was time for me. And so even though for a long time I really struggled with this, I struggled with being alone because the quality of my thinking was so poor, the automatic direction that my brain went in was incredibly negative, and I didn't understand the think-feel-act cycle. But once you understand how that cycle works, you understand why time to yourself either feels like a blessing or feels like a curse. It just depends what you're thinking.

So if you have a low tolerance for being alone, it's going to make changing the habit of drinking even harder. It really will because what you are doing is taking away a substance that covered it up, that covered up that alone time for you. And you know, I've talked about this so many times on the podcast.

Not only can a drink dull your feelings and quiet your inner critic, but it also is a way to really kind of trick your brain into thinking that it's having a better time than it really is. It's a way to consume fun instead of creating fun. So you make your brain think, "This is more enjoyable" because you're giving yourself all that dopamine, so your brain doesn't have to just be with your natural thought patterns, like what you've learned to habitually think.

Learning how to be on your own and enjoy it is the opposite of consuming fun. It is the opposite of tricking yourself. It is about being present with how you feel, it is about being present with your thoughts and learning how to change them, learning how to redirect your mind. But you can't do one without the other. You can't stop using a drink in the evening to entertain yourself to consume fun, and neglect the work of learning how to be with yourself. Learning how to be with yourself is incredibly important.

So there are a couple things that if you want to start exploring this work you can start to do on your own. One, find times in your day to just practice being alone. Doesn't have to be a huge chunk of time. It can just be the

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time on your commute, the time standing in line at the grocery store, just see if you can practice on purpose being alone.

And when you're doing that, the next thing you can do is just observe where your thoughts automatically go. What does your brain turn to? What is in there? Because if you can see what's in there, you can start to change it, but you cannot change it until you have that awareness.

The third thing to do once you have found time to be by yourself, to practice being by yourself, and then observed your thinking is to really pinpoint, "Okay, so how are these thoughts making me feel? Let me see if I can understand this in the think-feel-act cycle."

Now, here's the thing. You may discover that it doesn't make you feel very good. But the most important thing for you to remember is that your thoughts are always optional, always. You can always think about something differently. You are not stuck with your thoughts.

They may feel like you are just because your brain is like, "You know what, it's just super easy to think this thought. It's super easy to think I'm not enough, or I'm not living up to my potential, or I'm always going to be alone." Right? It's easy, and so your brain doesn't want to shift, but you can teach your brain to shift your thinking on purpose.

And then finally, this is the work of starting to see how you can shift your attention ever so slightly. I'm not talking about huge leaps and bounds where you're going from "This day is miserable" to "I'm so lucky to be alive", right? That's going to feel false.

I never advocate just slapping on positive thinking, it doesn't work. But you can start to think about, you know what, what do I want to focus on purpose? What would be some high-quality thinking? What would be some high-quality areas of focus that I could practice bringing my attention to?

So if you're walking to the grocery store, instead of focusing on the million things on your to-do list, maybe you just actually want to pay attention to

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what's happening around you. Maybe you just want to notice the world, just see what's around you. When you're driving in the car, instead of worrying about the big project at work, maybe you want to think about the people in your life that you love.

Maybe you want to think about a happy memory, right? Maybe you want to think about what you have in your life that you're really grateful for. You can start to really subtly practice shifting and diverting your attention on purpose. Just because your brain automatically goes somewhere does not mean that you can't intervene. You can always intervene with your thinking, and your thoughts are always optional. You can always choose to think something different.

This is what I can promise to you. If you start cultivating time on your own and seeing what's in there and understanding how it's making you feel, and changing, subtly changing that alone time with yourself, you are going to have such a leg up when it comes to changing your drinking. I promise you, this shift for me was huge. It made all the difference.

And just like every skill that I'm teaching you, it's something that you can practice. You can practice being better at being alone. It's a skill, and it's one that really, really is going to change things for you if you want to change this habit.

Alright, I hope you guys enjoyed today's podcast, I hope you go check out that book *Bear by Himself*. It's so good, it's such a beautiful book. If you look for it, it was actually – I think it was the 70's when it came out, the original version with the older illustrations, it's just really beautiful. So if you're ever also looking for a book for a little kid in your life, I can't recommend that one more highly.

Alright, thanks everybody. 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

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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.