

## Ep #398: Becoming a Normal Drinker



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Rachel Hart**

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## Ep #398: Becoming a Normal Drinker

You are listening to the *Take a Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, Episode 398.

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.

Welcome back, everybody. Today, we are talking about the desire to be a normal drinker. Which, of course, is very linked to the desire to change your relationship with alcohol or figure out what kind of relationship you want to have with alcohol.

So one of the things that really makes my approach different, and my work different, is that I am not prescriptive about how much you should or shouldn't be drinking. I'm not handing out guidelines. I'm not the arbiter of what is "good drinking" versus "bad drinking". I'm really just here to help you figure out what feels right for you and how to reach that place to give you the tools that you need to get there.

Different people are going to land in different places. The goal you have right now may change next year or five years or a decade from now, and that's okay. It's okay for us to arrive in different places. It's okay for our goal to change. It's not about everybody arriving at the same magical, perfect point with their drinking.

It's about believing that you know what's best for you, and you know how to get there. You know how to accomplish that. Again, that piece is what is so often missing; how do I accomplish that? Because nobody gives us tools. Nobody really helps us figure it out.

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I want to add, though, that culturally, we have this idea that people are often in denial. Denial about their drinking, or denial about their health, or denial about their relationships. I mean, denial has really seeped into how we explain why people aren't making the changes in their life that we think they should make.

The reason why I bring this up is, if people are in denial they can't possibly know what is best for them. But I want you to consider it differently. I think that for most people, when they have a behavior that feels compulsive or illogical or hard to control, or when they're in a situation that outwardly just looks like a bad situation, that this is not the result of someone being in denial.

This is about people being confused and scared and steeped in a lot of shame, and then feeling paralyzed by these emotions. I've worked with so many people, so many people.

And I will tell you that the vast, vast, vast majority will say, "There was a part of me inside that knew that I didn't really like my drinking. I didn't really feel comfortable with how much I drank, how fast I was drinking. I had this kind of knowing or intuition that something about my relationship with alcohol felt off, but I just didn't know where to bring this information or what to do with it."

In fact, this information kind of scared me. It kind of freaked me out because of how society talks about over-drinking, and how we talk about the kind of options and solutions that are available for people who feel like 'I don't feel like I can always control myself.'

So what I will say, is the vast majority of people know that something does not feel right. They want to change something about their drinking, but then confusion and shame and fear leaves them unable to figure out next steps.

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And being stuck in confusion and shame and fear, not only is it normal, but that doesn't mean that you aren't able to also decide what is best for you.

I believe it is possible for you to figure that out, for you to decide and figure out a relationship with alcohol that works for you. What you need though, is help getting out of the confusion and fear and shame keeping you stuck.

One of the things that happens when I offer this to people, especially when I'm working with someone, they really want me to tell them, 'Is this okay? Is this amount of drinking okay? Is deciding to drink, for whatever reason, last night, is this okay?' When someone really wants me to decide for them.

One of the things that I really encourage you, and encourage them, to think about is, why are you unsure that you know what is best for you? Why are you doubting that? And what comes up a lot is, people will say, "Okay, I like the idea that I'm in charge and it's my decision, but I also kind of deeply believe that I can't trust myself. So how do I reconcile this? How am I both the person in charge and also the person that can't be trusted?"

It's kind of a pickle to be in. How can you possibly know what is best for yourself if you can't trust yourself? And part of this is unpacking why it is that you believe that you can't trust yourself around certain things. I believe that this largely happens because we are not given a framework to understand our behaviors, to understand our drinking.

This is why learning about the think-feel-act cycle is so incredibly powerful, and learning how to apply it to your situation can be so transformative, because suddenly your drinking goes from something that kind of happens to you, or it just kind of feels outside of your control, to a decision that you made.

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Now, here's the thing. You may not always like that decision. You may look back and wish that you had made a different one. You also may not know how to make a different decision right now. But what I want to offer you is, at least there's a decision being made. At least you can see that it's happening. Because if you can see it, then there's a place for you to intervene and to start practicing something new.

But if your drinking, it's just happening to you... This kind of, well, right, once I start, I can't stop... if it's all just happening to you, if your ability to not drink tonight is just like, well, who knows? It's just a roll of the dice, then you're in such a disempowered position.

Because then it's like, well, what are you going to do? You're just going to kind of pray that every day you're not going to give into your cravings, or you won't have a craving, or you're not going to encounter your triggers, or you're not going to have to face temptation.

And when you think about it that way, to me, that really is the worst place to be in, to feel like the only way that I can trust myself is if the stars all line up just so, so that I can be successful.

So there's a piece of believing that you know what's best for you. And there's a piece of understanding why you're currently making the decisions that you're making.

But another part of figuring out a relationship with alcohol that works for you, and the reason why I'm talking about this before getting into this idea of just wanting to be a normal drinker, is because I want you to zoom out beyond just focusing on a question of quantity, or how much you're drinking.

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I want you to put that aside for a second and really understand how you relate to alcohol. When it comes to deciding on a relationship with alcohol, I talk about four areas that really help you examine what feels good and right and comfortable for you.

So I talk about these four areas in the *Ultimate Guide to Drinking Less*, which you can go to my website and get a copy of. I go in depth on these four areas in Episode 292 of the podcast, which is all about how to have a normal relationship with alcohol, so you can listen to that episode.

I mentioned you can grab a copy of the guide if you want to understand this in depth, but in short, there are four areas that I believe you need to focus on. Again, not just focusing on how much, not just focusing on quantity, but really weaving in these areas when you're deciding on a relationship with alcohol that feels good for you.

Again, this is about what is good for you and what feels right for you.

So the first one is your internal chatter around drinking. The second is your problem-solving ability. The third is your opinion of alcohol, and the fourth is your self-regard. I'm not going to go deep into all of these here because you can go listen to the podcast episode 292, but I really see these four areas as points on a compass.

Checking in with each one helps you assess if you feel like you're headed in the right direction, if you're kind of sensing that there's something that maybe you need to take a look at or address, when it comes to the decisions that you're making around drinking or not drinking. And I do want to mention this. You got to assess these areas, even if you're abstaining from alcohol. Even if you're taking a break.

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Because a lot of people come to me and they'll say, "Okay, Rachel, I haven't had a drink for this many months, this many years, and so much of my life has improved and I'm feeling better. But I'm really resentful when I go out to dinner and everyone else is drinking and I'm not. I still have all this shame about things that happened in the past when I was drunk. I feel really healthy, but I also just kind of feel like I'm kind of missing out on life. I'm avoiding being social or seeing certain people."

What I want you to know, is just because you abstain doesn't mean you have a healthy or a peaceful relationship with alcohol. You can abstain from drinking, and you can have a lot of drama around it. In fact, this was really true for me for a long time.

Because, of course, nobody explained this to me, right? Nobody kind of helped me look beyond quantity and understand how I was relating to alcohol. So I really encourage you to check out that podcast. or get the guide if you want to take a look at this for yourself.

But what I want to talk about today, is about this goal of being a "normal drinker". I also want to talk about the fantasy that we attach to this idea. Now, I will just share, this was also my fantasy for the longest time. There is a reason why I named my first book *Why Can't I Drink Like Everyone Else?* I just wanted to be a normal drinker. I just wanted to drink normally.

I mean, normalness, I don't even know if that's a word, but it was such a big part of what I really wanted to achieve. So it wasn't just about making better decisions around alcohol, it really was this longing to be like everyone else, or kind of what I perceived how everyone else was like.

I see this appear for people that I'm working with all the time. People often tell me that their goal is, I just want to drink normally. I just want to be able to take it or leave it. But what I want you to think about, and what I'm always encouraging people to kind of dig a little deeper beneath the

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surface here, is to get curious about the fantasy attached to this goal; a fantasy that you may not even realize is there.

Because the goal of being a normal drinker sounds like it's just about drinking, but it's not. It's not really about alcohol at all, whatever your brain has deemed abnormal. So whether it's your drinking or your eating or your body or your emotions or how you interact with others, whatever your brain currently sees as weird or abnormal, I want you to consider that you have unconsciously attached a fantasy to this area of your life.

And that fantasy sounds like “if I can fix this thing about me, then I will feel okay about myself.” And what I have for you is the worst news and the best news. And that's that this fantasy isn't true. It isn't. It's not true simply because this is not how the human brain works.

If your brain learned to always scan for what makes you different or weird or abnormal, then guess what? Fixing whatever it is you want to fix, whether it's your drinking or something else, is not going to change that underlying pattern, that underlying habit in the brain.

Even if you fix your drinking, even if you change your body, whatever it is that you're hoping, “If only I could change this thing, then I would be normal. Then I would feel okay about myself,” the bad news is that your brain is going to keep scanning for new and different things that it finds weird or abnormal about you.

Not because your brain is out to get you, but because the human brain likes to be efficient. It likes to save energy. It's got a lot of practice scanning for evidence about how certain parts of you, or certain behaviors, are a sign that something is different about you or something in you is not like other people.

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And that is not just going to magically go “poof!” and change just because you learned how to change a behavior. The only way for the brain to change, to stop scanning all the time for why it is that you're different, is to start to, on purpose, tell the brain to create a new pattern. To teach your brain to scan for what makes you the same, what unites you with others. To find all the commonalities rather than the differences.

I've mentioned this quote on the podcast before, but back when I was really starting out on my own journey to figure out, what is the relationship that you want to have with alcohol, Rachel? Of course, back then, when I was starting out, it was just like, “I just want a normal relationship.”

But there was one quote that was like a tether for me. It really just helped me in moments when I just felt so steeped in shame about my drinking. And I'm sure I'll butcher it, but the way that I say it to myself now is, “You've not always been your best self, which makes you just like everyone else.”

I remember reading that in a book, or some version of that in a book. That sentence lit up something inside of me, because I had so much shame about my drinking. I had so much shame about the things that I had done when I was drinking. And this idea, the idea that, yeah, Rachel, you haven't always been your best self, but that actually makes you just like everyone else, it was an enormous help for me.

Now, I will be honest. I also wanted to fight with this idea a little bit. I wanted to argue that “Well, my worst self is way worse than other people's worst selves.” I wanted to argue a little bit, “Well, the things that other people have done, that they feel shame about, it's not like what I've done.” Part of me really wanted to hang on to, “No, no, you're still different.”

But there was a part of me also that could connect with this idea, that this actually made me like others rather than separate from others. So it's not

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like my brain was ready to wholesale give up on, the idea that something about me was fundamentally flawed or broken or different or just bad.

But I also couldn't really argue with the idea that, you know what? No one is always their best self. We all have behaviors. We all have interactions where we wish we could have a do-over. We all have moments where we look back and cringe, and think, "Oh God, did I really do that? Did I really say that?" We all have these moments where we want to hide under the covers and never come out. That is something that everyone shares. It was not unique to me.

So there's changing your drinking, which is a huge part of what I teach and what I want to help you to do. But then there's also changing your view of yourself and what you think of yourself when you aren't who you want to be, when your reality doesn't match your vision for yourself.

These two things, changing your drinking and changing what you think of yourself, one doesn't just immediately lead to the other. They can be deeply connected, but you also have to let go of the idea that 'if only I was a normal drinker, then I would feel okay about who I am.' This is why I'm saying this is the best news and the worst news.

It's the worst news in that it means giving up the fantasy that probably you don't want to give up; I fix this thing and then I'm going to feel good, and I'm going to feel okay about myself. Because there's something really powerful about having a fantasy. Fantasies provide us with a lot of hope for a better future, and who among us wants to let go of hope?

But the hope that you get from this fantasy, I promise you, it's going to lead you astray. It's going to send you down the wrong path. That is why I want to share what I believe is the best news of the message that I'm sharing today.

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When you see that, yes, you can change your drinking. You can change your relationship with alcohol. All of this is possible, you were just not given any tools. You were not shown how to do this. And yes, you can regard yourself as okay, regardless of where you are along that journey.

If today is day one on that journey of figuring out your relationship with alcohol, you can regard yourself as okay. No matter what happened last night or last week. You can see yourself as connected to others, and part of this big mess of what it means to be human and find solace in that.

But you must be clear-eyed to see right now that if you're shaming yourself about your drinking, fixing it, becoming a "normal drinker" is not going to be the thing that finally makes you feel okay about yourself. That is a separate thing, but it is a no less important part of habit change.

Learning how to change your behaviors without making "bad behaviors" mean you're broken, and "good behaviors" mean you're worthy. This is an incredibly important piece that most of us overlook. I overlooked it for a long time. I just thought, "If I can just keep on lining up more and more good behaviors, then I'm going to finally feel about myself." It doesn't work like that. I had to learn how to separate these things out.

So what I want you to walk away with from this episode today is just a curiosity of what you want when you think to yourself, "Oh, I just want to be a normal drinker. I just want to be able to take it or leave it." Or even if you have the idea of, "I just want to stop drinking." Whatever your goal is, I want you to think about the fantasy that you may have attached to this idea.

I want you to get curious about how you think you would feel differently about yourself if right now I could wave my magic wand and give you your wish, right? You can just step into that version of yourself who never drank too much, or who could take it or leave it, or never drank again, whatever it

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is, what do you believe that you would be feeling and thinking differently about yourself?

I really encourage you to get curious about this, because it is going to give you a window into this fantasy. And you need to see this so you can separate these things out. So you can stop confusing, “If I just fix this thing, if I just become a normal drinker, then I'm going to feel okay about myself.” So get curious. What would it mean if I waved the magic wand? I gave you what you wished for?

Does it mean that you wouldn't feel shame anymore? Does it mean that you wouldn't feel embarrassed anymore? Does it mean that you would finally believe that nothing was wrong with you? Get curious about your answer. What have you attached to this fantasy? Are you willing to entertain the idea that what you are actually hoping for is something that you can feel right now?

You can *right now* struggle with your drinking and not make it mean that you're broken. You can *right now* want to drink less and not make how much you drank into a sign that you're a bad person or that something is wrong with you.

You can, right at this very moment, wish that you had behaved differently while you were drinking and accept that everybody has these moments. They may not always manifest around alcohol, but everybody has these moments where they wish they could have a do-over.

And you know what? You're actually much more likely to figure out how to avoid repeating this behavior that you didn't like when you try to understand why it happened from a place of compassion; a place of seeing yourself like other people rather than different from them. Okay?

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So if you want to go deeper into the four pieces I talked about on deciding a relationship with alcohol, not just thinking or only focusing on quantity, check out Episode 292 of the podcast, or you can grab a copy of *The Ultimate Guide to Drinking Less* at RachelHart.com.

All right, 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 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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