

Ep #399: Why Counting Drinks Can Backfire



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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 399.

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.

Hello, hello, everyone. We are talking today about why counting drinks can backfire. I want to talk about this because it is such a common strategy. It is one that I used myself for a very, very long time. And I suffered a lot, because it was so hit or miss. I couldn't understand why I couldn't just set a number and stick to that number when I was drinking. And I had a lot of shame and anxiety about the fact that this was a struggle for me.

I know a lot of you out there do as well, and I want to help you understand why this strategy can backfire. Because, I mean, it makes a lot of sense, right? You have a goal to drink less, you've got plenty of good reasons why this goal matters to you, but then, when you try to implement a rule or a number, you try to count your drinks, what you will find is that your success rate will be spotty.

And when something is hit-or-miss, or you have a spotty success rate, it can be really confusing. Most people immediately bring the blame inwards, right? We start looking at ourselves as the problem. Is it me? What's wrong with me? Why is this hard for me?

What I want you to know is that you are not the problem, there is nothing wrong with you, you're just missing a really important piece of the equation. And I'm going to talk to you today about what that is, and what you can be doing instead. S

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Again, counting drinks, it makes a lot of sense. If you plan to have fewer drinks, you're going to wake up happier. So I kind of regard counting drinks as similar to counting calories. And I believe that both of these strategies can be great awareness raising tools.

So what I mean by that is, especially when you're initially starting out, if you're kind of new in the place of wanting to reevaluate your drinking and having that little niggling sense inside that maybe you're drinking more than you want to, or your relationship with alcohol doesn't feel quite right to you, tracking how much you drink, it can be really eye opening.

It's like anything, like food or money or how many hours we sit at a desk, unless we are explicitly paying attention, we often tend to underestimate how much we're eating, how much we're spending, how much we're sitting, and of course, how much we're drinking. So our brain doesn't just automatically do the math for us.

And sometimes, when you're paying attention and you're counting, sometimes just seeing the number can be really eye opening. But here's the thing. As an awareness raising exercise, counting drinks can be great. But as a long-term solution to drinking less, as a way to change your relationship with alcohol, I find that it really doesn't work that well.

One of the reasons why, is because counting has a way of disconnecting you from yourself, right? You're trying to follow a rule. You're trying to be on your best behavior rather than stepping into a place of authority with yourself. And listen, that's really where you need to be, right?

If you feel like once you start drinking, it's hard for you to rein yourself in, or if you feel like you don't have full control, then where you need to end up is feeling like you are an authority with yourself. That's what's really going to change your relationship with alcohol. Feeling like you are your own best authority is where you want to go. Rather than what most people try to do,

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“I just want to be a really good rule follower. I just want to get really good at following the rules.”

That's where all of my attention was for the longest time. But the problem with trying to become a really good rule follower is, even for those of you who enjoy following rules, you get that little bit of, ‘oh, I did something good. I'm going to give myself a gold star.’

What I see happen over and over again is that rules eventually turn into something that you start to resent and something that you want to resist against, right? So it becomes this kind of saying “eff it” to the rule; wanting to rebel against it, wanting to push back against it. Because when you're following rules, it doesn't feel like you're in charge. It feels like the rule is in charge.

So not only do you feel like you're not in charge, but just like counting calories, it's going to disconnect you from listening to your body, right? You're not going to be tuning into yourself. You're going to be fixated on a number.

And this really matters. It matters if you want to change your relationship with alcohol. It matters if you want to change your relationship with food. I mean, really it matters with everything; the ability to be more connected with yourself and tune into yourself.

So let me give you an example. Maybe you plan for three drinks. And you know what? Some nights, three drinks may be fine. It may feel fine. You may feel fine the next day.

But maybe you had a crappy night's sleep, or maybe you're coming down with a cold, or maybe you were really, really stressed out all day long. So three drinks on a regular day, when you're well-rested, when your immune

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system is strong, when you're in a good mood, maybe that's no problem for you.

But three drinks, or even two drinks or one drink, when you change a bunch of factors, whether it has to do with your sleep or your immune system or your mood or just so many other things, it may actually not be a very good idea. If you're focused on rule following, you're not really going to take any of that into account, right?

Taking that into account, all of that is kind of irrelevant. The only thing that's relevant is, "Okay, I've got to follow this rule." So it disconnects you from tuning in, checking in with yourself.

But there's another reason why this kind of fixation on counting drinks can backfire. Because the number that you choose often has very little to do with the reason *why* you're drinking. And when these two things don't match up, it's going to be very hard for you to stick to whatever number you choose.

So again, just for sake of an example, let's say that you have a rule for yourself that you can have, I don't know, one drink on Wednesdays. It really doesn't matter what the number is. But you set some sort of rule and your logical mind thinks, "This is a reasonable amount to have on a weekday."

Or you read somewhere that a daily glass of red wine is heart healthy. Or maybe you just kind of think that a "normal" person should be able to have one glass whenever they want. We come up with all these kind of good, logical-sounding reasons for the rules that we set for ourselves.

But whatever your logical reason is, that may not match up with a more unconscious part of why you want that drink on that day, why you are

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actually desiring it. This is where the Drink Archetypes™ come in. So if you haven't heard me talk about the Drink Archetypes, they are all about understanding the underlying meaning that your brain attaches to the drink.

So you kind of see a tasty beverage, but your unconscious mind sees something else. And that is very connected to what can be an often unconscious or hidden part of your desire. Let's just say that the drink archetype that's activated for you in this moment is The Escape archetype.

Again, this scenario can unfold with really any of the eight archetypes, but I'm going to talk about The Escape just for this example. The Escape archetype is all about that desire to pour a drink to forget what is bothering you. Maybe you had a terrible meeting with your boss today, or you're angry at your partner, or you're really worried about one of your kids.

What's bothering you really matters less than understanding how it's connected to your desire to drink. So again, you tell yourself, "Listen, I have a rule. I can have one drink on Wednesdays. One is reasonable. One's not unhealthy," whatever the logic is, or the reasoning is behind why you have this rule for.

But what happens if The Escape archetype happens to be activated that Wednesday? Is one drink going to satisfy the desire of your unconscious mind to forget what's bothering you? What I want to suggest to you is that no, it's not.

So one of the exercises that I have for The Escape archetype, inside the "Ultimate Guide to Drinking Less", is called "Question the Effectiveness of a Serving". Again, it's useful for The Escape archetype, but also can be applied to many of the other archetypes, like The Hourglass, The Release, The Remedy, and The Reward.

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The idea behind this exercise in the book is to measure out a standard serving of whatever you're drinking. And then, before you start drinking, to look at that serving in the glass or in the bottle and ask yourself this question: Is this really going to be enough for me to fully escape this feeling?

Now, so much of the work that I teach, and my focus, is really about slowing down the habit. Slowing down to really get curious about your cravings. Slowing down to kind of create these moments of pause, where you can step back for a second and maybe just bring awareness or bring a question or just really interrupt the habit.

And so this is one of those exercises, we're interrupting the habit with a question; asking yourself this question: Is this really going to be enough for me to fully escape this feeling? And then answering the question.

Now, here's the thing. We are so conditioned to believe that a drink is going to make us feel better, right? Like, "Oh, I just need a drink. A drink would really help right now." But when it's put in terms of really examining a standard serving in a glass, in a bottle, when you're really just looking at the actual ounces contained in one standard drink, suddenly the effectiveness of what is before you to fully escape how you feel or to even just change how you feel, suddenly that effectiveness comes into question.

Again, if The Escape archetype is activated, is it really going to help me to forget what's bothering me? If it's The Hourglass archetype, looking at it and being like: Is one going to be enough here to stop me from feeling bored, or to make this situation more tolerable?

If it's The Release, looking at that standard serving and asking yourself: Is this really going to help me feel totally free and stop censoring myself? If it's The Reward: Is this really going to satisfy me for the treat that I'm desiring, or to fully relax from my day?

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I mean, I can go on and on here, but the goal of the exercise is always the same, regardless of the archetype, to help you slow down and recognize... Even if you tell yourself, "Listen, I'm going to stick to a set number of drinks" ... you're actually, in that moment, able to see that you're really unlikely to keep that promise.

Because even if it's more than a single serving, you slow down to be like, is that really enough to really get at the desire? That unconscious desire that I have? Or am I just going to be caught in this kind of loop of wanting more?

Now I will tell you this, this also applies for an archetype like The Upgrade, where the desire to drink is about making things feel special or celebratory. It applies in the sense that counting can backfire here as well.

So maybe your unconscious desire is not at all connected with a negative emotion, but it may be connected to this idea that your brain has decided that your experience, your situation, what you are doing, is lacking without a drink. That is what happens a lot with The Upgrade archetype.

As soon as your brain decides that whatever you are doing, the dinner, the party, the sunset, whatever it is, is lacking without a drink, what happens? You actually steal your own capacity for enjoyment, because the lower brain's desire for a reward, it diverts your attention away from everything else. Everything else around you there is to enjoy, all the specialness that is there, that has nothing to do with what you're drinking.

It's almost like your brain is wearing blinders and all it can see is the drink, right? "And this will be the thing that will make it special. This will be the thing that will elevate whatever I'm doing. And without it, everything will be lacking."

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So all of this is to say, regardless of what archetype or combination of archetypes are activated, that using counting and trying to follow rules is not a great long-term solution. It can be great as an awareness-raising tool, but for most people, you're going to find that it's really going to be hit or miss.

Because instead of trying to develop authority with yourself, you're trying to become a good rule follower. And you will eventually start to feel resentful of the rules. You will eventually have moments where you want to resist the rule or rebel against the rule. And why this is happening is because when we focus exclusively on a number, on how much, the quantity, and trying to not go beyond that number, what you're not doing is addressing the unconscious part of your desire.

You're not examining the drink archetype. You're making a rule for yourself about how much you're allowed to drink. But then, because that drink archetype is also activated, you're going to have to deal with whatever bubbles up when it comes time for you to say no.

Maybe that is the fear of missing out or people-pleasing or stress or overwhelm or anxiety, or just feeling restlessness or shame or fear. I mean, so many different things will start to bubble up, depending on the archetype, and that will make it very difficult for you to keep your commitment.

Not to mention the fact that you're just not tuning in with yourself, right? You just have this arbitrary number rather than really examining, "Let's really take a look about my whole situation. Let me take a look at all of this and see, does this number that I've selected, this rule, does it actually have any bearing on where I am, in terms of my mood and my health and my immune system?" And all of the factors that contribute to how alcohol affects us?

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So what I want you to take away from this, is that if you are struggling with counting drinks, if you are struggling with following a set number, this is not a flaw inside of you. This is not a sign that something is wrong with you or something is broken. The reason this is hard, and it is hard for the vast majority of people, is because you are not a machine.

You are a complex individual, and that complexity will change. It changes day to day. You will have different drink archetypes activated depending on your situation, depending on what's happening in your life. You will have a very conscious desire for why you want the drink, but you will also have a more unconscious desire, and both of those have to be addressed.

So the solution, again, it really isn't about 'let me become amazing at following rules.' It really is, 'let me develop having authority with myself.' And that really means turning your attention inward. It's not about having this external rule that you just become really good at following. It's really about understanding, okay, if I want to have authority with myself, what does that start to look like? What does that even mean?

But I promise you this, you cannot have that authority if you're always trying to avoid yourself, if you're not checking in with yourself, if you don't want to be curious about what's going on inside of you.

So if you want to learn more about the Drink Archetypes, if you haven't taken the free quiz, you can do that at DrinkType.com. You will get your results, and you will also be able to read up on the different archetypes. What I think is really amazing about learning about the archetypes is not just to understand this unconscious piece of your desire, but all of the archetypes are connected to superpowers.

This is why I really find this work to be so incredibly transformative. Because it's not, to me, about just "I've got to get a hold of a bad habit." When done correctly, you can use these archetypes to really grow and

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evolve in a way that's very exciting, beyond anything that you might be thinking right now in terms of your relationship with alcohol.

So you can go check out the quiz. And if you want to really dive into working with these archetypes and getting into the different exercises for each one, I really encourage you to check out the "Ultimate Guide to Drinking Less". You can get that on my website, at RachelHart.com.

That really goes in depth to all of the best practices, all of the different exercises for the archetypes, and really gives you everything that you need to change the habit from the inside out.

So remember, counting, it can be great for awareness raising, but once you've raised your awareness, you really need something that's going to help you start to transform the habit and transform your relationship with alcohol.

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.

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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.