

Ep #401: Why You Shouldn't Demonize Alcohol



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Rachel Hart

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Do you feel a little defensive when people start talking about the harms of drinking? Or maybe you feel annoyed when a newly sober friend starts going on and on about how alcohol is poison or toxic?

This is Episode 401, and I'm explaining why demonizing alcohol or fixating on its harms is not a great way to help you drink less and can actually block you from deciding the role you want alcohol to play in your life.

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.

So I was talking to my husband recently about a common refrain that you hear from people who no longer drink. It's the idea that alcohol is toxic or a poison. So maybe, if you've gone down a sober curious rabbit hole online, you've come across statements like, "Why would I willingly want to poison my body?"

And I will tell you this. I still, because of the work that I do, hear people and hear this messaging a lot. And even today, I find myself feeling a little resistant inside when this kind of demonizing of alcohol takes center stage.

So, you know I talk about this on the podcast a lot. Alcohol has been with humans for thousands of years. It existed well before there were humans. Our species just learned how to harness fermentation and produce it in large quantities. It is one of many substances that humans figured out how to use to change our feeling state. Things like sugar and caffeine and nicotine and cocaine and psilocybin.

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And yes, like most things, if you consume too much alcohol, it can definitely harm the body. If you drink too much, it can kill you. And if you have a relationship with alcohol that you don't feel good about, or maybe you've made choices when you were drinking that you later regretted, or maybe you even put yourself in danger by how much you were drinking, you may have at some point thought to yourself, "I should just keep reminding myself how bad it is for me."

The reason why so many of us kind of come to this conclusion, and I came to this conclusion for a very long time in my own journey, but the reason why so many of us come to this same conclusion, 'I should just remind myself how bad it is for me,' is because this is really the mainstream approach for dealing with alcohol abuse and misuse, right? To go all in on focusing on the harms of drinking and kind of hit people over the head with the dangers.

So, "Hey, you know it's bad for you. It's bad for your liver. It's bad for your heart. It's bad for your brain. Why would you want to poison yourself? Why would you want to do something that puts you at risk or endangers you in any way?" That is so much of the messaging that we get from a very young age.

As I was talking to my husband about this, he said something that I think really sums up why I choose not to approach alcohol from the place of 'it's bad. It's harming you. It's a poison. It's toxic.' Even if it is creating harmful or negative consequences for you, even if that's the case, I still don't think it makes sense to demonize it.

So my husband said to me, "The people who are all about alcohol being poison are a bit like the people who say meat is murder. I know that there are a lot of benefits of eating less meat, but as soon as someone comes at me with that argument, I shut down and I stop listening." And when he said that I was like, "Oh, that's such a good analogy."

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Because I think it captures what happens inside of you, as the listener, when someone makes kind of a hard-line argument or takes a stance that doesn't create any space to acknowledge or examine nuance. Now to be clear, because I know a lot of people have very strong opinions, not just about alcohol, but about food.

I'm not here to tell you what to think. What I want you to understand is what happens when you, as a listener, find yourself feeling defensive when someone makes an argument like this. On the food front, to be clear, I am an omnivore. I've explored a lot of different types of diets. I've spent time thinking about what I eat from an ethical perspective, from a health perspective, and from an ecological perspective.

And compared to my husband, I definitely lean towards a diet with a lot less animal product. I eat way less meat than he does. Sometimes this has been a source of contention in our relationship. Because what he wants to eat for dinner and what I want to eat for dinner don't always line up.

Now that said, even though I lean towards a diet with way less meat than my husband, we both have a very similar reaction to the message, "Meat is murder." When I hear this, I notice resistance bubble up in my body. I'm automatically defensive. Even though I think part of me would be open to a conversation about why I should put more thought into the choices I make with the animal products that I eat.

And I think that some of my resistance is that I just generally don't like black-and-white positions that lack nuance. That's kind of across the board. But I also think that some of my resistance is actually a protective mechanism, right? Because if meat is murder and I ate a hamburger yesterday, then what does that say about me as a person?

If murder is bad and meat is murder and I just ate a hamburger, well, then now am I a bad person? We all know, I talk about this all the time, we all

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know the thought, "I'm bad." When we think, "I'm bad," it triggers the feeling of shame, and nobody likes to feel shame. In fact, humans will go to great lengths to avoid shame.

And so it's actually very natural and normal to recoil at messages or messengers who we feel like are shaming us. Now you might say, "Well, people should feel bad. They shouldn't have their heads in the sand when it comes to matters that create harm."

And these people might say, "For all the people who feel defensive at messages like these, what about the people who do change because they heard a message like this? What about the 10% of people who wake up and see the light?"

My problem with this argument, my problem when we take these kinds of hard-line stances, these positions that lack nuance, is what about the 90% of people who shut down? When we have messages that either don't acknowledge or just outright refuse nuance, it doesn't take into account what happens to the person listening. The person who is not moved by this message. And in fact, maybe puts up resistance, right?

When someone feels like they are being shamed, what do they do? They hide. They don't want to look at the problem, they want to avoid it. They get defensive. They dig in. And guess what? When all of this happens, it leads to no change in behavior.

And so let's take this idea and apply it to alcohol. If alcohol is poison, what does it mean about the beers you had with your friends yesterday? Or the bottle of wine that you split with your partner? And if you know it's not great for your health and you drink it anyway, what does that mean about you?

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Now I am sure that the people who are in the camp that alcohol is poison would say, and I believe them, they would say that their intent is not to shame people. I'm totally on board that I believe that this is not the intent behind this message. I don't think that their goal is to make people feel bad or say people are bad for drinking.

I think their goal is to kind of shine a light on something that they think is really overlooked. But just because your goal is to help, doesn't mean that people aren't experiencing shame when they hear your message. I mean, think about it, right? How many times have you had too much to drink and your assessment of what happened the next day was, "Ugh, what's wrong with me? What am I going to stop being so stupid? What am I going to stop being so irresponsible?" Most of us, right?

When we don't feel good about our relationship with alcohol, we're already swimming in self-talk that generates so much shame. Most people are already on the "shame bus". And guess what? When your self-talk leans towards chalking up your decisions with alcohol as either stupid or bad or irresponsible, your brain is going to very quickly make the leap, when it hears a message that demonizes alcohol, it's going to make the leap to demonizing yourself.

Words like "poison" and "toxic" most often just up the ante on the shame that so many people feel. Because poisons are destructive and harmful. They are substances that can kill or injure. Poisons are not something that a logical, smart, responsible person would knowingly ingest.

Except that if the history of humanity shows us anything, it's that logical, smart, responsible people *do choose* to knowingly consume substances that can be harmful to the body, for a variety of reasons. And not because humans are stupid, but because the quest to feel better is universal. And if humans have a long history of doing this, isn't it worth examining why.

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Maybe you're not sure where you personally stand when it comes to demonizing alcohol. Maybe part of you is like, "Yeah, but Rachel, it is bad for me. It is harming me."

So what I want you to do is just ask yourself what happens when you think that? When you, right now, are looking at your relationship with alcohol and your drinking habits, and when you tell yourself that alcohol is bad for you or alcohol is harming you, what bubbles up inside? What do you feel?

Do you feel open and receptive to examining your drinking, or anything that we want to label as "bad"? Or do you immediately kind of feel a little on guard, or a little shame or a little guilt? Or maybe even a gripping feeling of, "Hey, don't take this thing away."

I will tell you, I for one spent a very long-time kind of just digging in my heels when it came to my drinking. I used to have a very complicated relationship with alcohol. Part of me loved to drink. I looked forward to it. I enjoyed the release that it gave me from having to listen to my inner critic and the release from my stress and my anxiety and awkwardness.

And part of me didn't like it at all. I hated that it felt like I couldn't stop once I started. I hated that it seemed to have more of a pull over me than it did for many of my friends. I hated waking up the next day feeling so embarrassed about what I did or said or how I acted when I was drinking. Or worse still, being so drunk that I couldn't even remember what I did.

Still, despite this very complicated relationship, I immediately shut down in the face of messages like, "Alcohol is poison. Why would you willingly poison yourself?" I already felt stupid because I couldn't control myself, right? I already chalked it up to, "You should just be smarter, Rachel. And so if you're not going to be smart in the moment, well, then you are stupid."

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I already had all of that. Messages that focused on the harmful effects of drinking only reinforced the shame that I already felt. The problem is that scare tactics or hammering home the negative health effects of alcohol or really anything, is that whether or not people intend the message to come off this way, many people walk away feeling worse after hearing it.

As a society, we still hold so tight to the idea that we can shame or guilt people into behavior change, right? It's the idea that, "Okay, if you just knew how bad something was for you, you wouldn't do it." But don't we have plenty of evidence that this in fact does not work?

Humans do lots of things that are not good for their health. We move too little. We sit too much. We stare at screens for too long. We eat too much. We eat foods that make our body go haywire. I mean, you could just go on and on and on with this list.

And I would argue that using scare tactics or shaming these behaviors is not the path to change. Yes, sometimes shame can work to temporarily change a behavior. I sometimes felt so much shame about my drinking that I would wake up and I would say, "Never again." And that would last maybe for a day or a weekend or a week or a month or sometimes six months at a time. And then, guess what? Eventually I would pick up right where I left off.

You can shame yourself into no longer drinking. You can shame yourself into following a diet. You can shame yourself into cutting up your credit cards. And yes, that shame that you used can create temporarily changes that are positive. But I promise you, these benefits are temporary.

What people don't realize is that in the process of shaming yourself into being "good", what's happening is that you still, deep down, believe that you and your behaviors are a representation, or an indication I should say, that you are bad. And this belief that you are bad will create a very

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messed-up relationship with alcohol or food or money, and a very messed up relationship with yourself.

What you will end up doing is you will unconsciously tie your worth to something outside of you, right? It will sound kind of like, "Well, I'm good if I don't drink. And I'm bad if I do. I'm good if I follow my diet. I'm bad if I don't. I'm good if I pay off all my credit card bills. I'm bad if I let myself get into debt." When you do this, when your self-worth is tied to ensuring that you behave in a certain way, you are in a lot of trouble. You just are.

What I have found in my own life and working with so many people, is that even if you're in the midst of a period of being "good" ... So maybe you're currently taking a break from drinking, or you're following a diet plan to a "T", or you're not spending money on your credit cards ... guess what? It doesn't feel good because part of you is so afraid of slipping up.

And even if you reach your goal... I work with so many people who will say, "I haven't had a drink in a year. It was a goal that I never thought that I was going to be able to achieve, and I did it." Or maybe you reach your goal weight, or maybe you paid off your debt. So many people will be in the position of having met their goal and then being terrified of it all going away.

You won't even be able to enjoy your success because part of you is like, "Well, what if it doesn't last? What if my success is a fluke?" You're in this very kind of like shaky ground because you've been using "good" behavior to prove that you aren't bad or broken.

But fundamentally some part of you is still believing that you are, otherwise, you wouldn't need to use all these "good" behaviors to prove otherwise. So guess what? You can be doing the good thing and still have a very hard time letting go of the shame.

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And here's the thing. If you're walking this kind of tightrope, trying to prove that you're good by doing the good thing, you're walking this tightrope, what happens if you do give in? If you do say yes to a craving? If you stop following the diet plan? If you start putting money on your credit card? Guess what? Now you're going to feel doubly bad.

You're going to use this as more evidence, like, "See? I am bad. I am broken. Something really is wrong with me. I knew I couldn't change, because why else would I do something that I know isn't good for me?" You're just totally stuck in this good and bad mindset. This idea that you have to kind of earn or prove that you aren't a bad person.

And guess what? No part of you is actually examining *why* it happened. No part of you is actually getting curious why you would choose to do something, even when it has consequences that you don't like, right? You've just blocked all of that ability to have inquiry and curiosity about what is actually going on.

What I want you to consider from this episode is, what would help you feel more open to examining your current relationship with alcohol? And what I want to suggest, what has helped me and what has helped so many people that I have worked with, is positioning alcohol in a neutral place so it's neither good or bad.

And this is not just alcohol, this includes drinking and how much you drink. It's neither good nor bad, right? "Alcohol is just something that has existed long before I came to be and will keep existing long after I'm gone." So I found it really helped me to acknowledge that even things that everybody wants to agree is a healthy thing, even "healthy" things can cause harm to the body, right?

Once I stopped trying to slot everything into this kind of "good or bad", "right or wrong" column, you can just then examine your personal relationship

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with the habit, with your drinking, with the role that alcohol plays in your life, and go from there.

So I want you to try doing that today, to step out of the place where we're not glorifying it but we're also not demonizing it. Your choices around it don't make *you* good or bad. They don't make you normal or abnormal. If we can just remove all of that judgment, how would you then decide how much or if you wanted to drink, and the role you wanted alcohol to play in your life? I want you all to give that a think.

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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