

Ep #406: How To Have a Successful Dry January



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Rachel Hart

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There's one word that will undermine any attempts to drink less. And that word is "can't". "I can't drink. I can't have alcohol this month." Most people embark on Dry January with a mindset of "can't". But when you tell yourself that you can't have something that you want often enough, you'll not only feel resentful, you're actually going to increase your desire.

This is Episode 406, and I'm going to explain the six things you need to focus on instead if you want to have a successful Dry January and drink less this year.

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.

Okay, so the season of Dry January is right around the corner. And while taking a break from drinking can be such an amazing gift to your mind and your body, I've watched so many people set themselves up for failure when they decide to take a break from alcohol.

And keep in mind, I did this myself for over a decade. So I usually followed the same pattern. I'd get to a point in life where I was kind of fed up with my drinking or worried about it, and I'd tell myself that I wasn't allowed to drink for a certain period of time. I would then double down on things like willpower and avoidance and distraction in order to make it to this goal date that I had in my calendar.

So here's what would happen, because I did this again and again. Either I would quickly fail and decide that meant that I was just someone who couldn't change. Or I would make it to the magical day using willpower and distraction and avoidance. I'd get to that day where my break was over, and then shortly thereafter, I would drink way too much.

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It was like, I just went right back to where I had been before I started. So I decided to revisit one of my earliest episodes where I explain why this happens, along with six things that you need to focus on if you want to have a successful Dry January this year. Because if done right, they can be amazing.

I'm also talking about one major mindset shift that you need to make that's really going to help you change your relationship with alcohol and your drinking for good. Enjoy.

Today, we are talking about how *not* to take a break. Now listen, the name of the podcast is how to *Take a Break* from drinking. But today, we're talking about how not to take a break, and here's why.

I see the same mistakes over and over again when people are trying to change their drinking, and they decide, "I'm just going to take a break. I've just got to stop for a while." Right? I see these mistakes over and over again, and that's what I want to talk to you about today.

Now listen, I have a lot of personal experience with this. If you have been listening to the podcast, if you've picked up my book *Why Can't I Drink Like Everyone Else?*, you know that I took a lot of breaks from drinking in my 20s. In fact, the very first break that I took from drinking was shortly after my 22nd birthday and it lasted for almost a year.

But I started drinking again a year after that break, after I turned about 23, because I just felt like I was always missing out. I always still had this desire with me, and it felt like this battle. I felt physically better, I felt emotionally better, but that sense of missing out, it never left my side.

And so that was the very first break that I took, and the very first time that I decided, "Okay, well this seemed good, but I'm deciding to go back to

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drinking because I can't handle missing out. I can't hinder all this desire and all this deprivation."

But I would go on to take many more breaks throughout my 20s, and what would usually happen would be that I would just get so fed up with myself. Maybe I did something stupid, or embarrassing, or I just woke up feeling miserable and so hungover in the morning, and I just thought like, "I got to take it out, I can't do it."

So you know I have a lot of experience taking breaks and knowing what works and what doesn't work. And I will tell you that all of the breaks I took during my 20s, I always went back to drinking. My desire never abated. And so what I want to talk to you about today is what changed, how you can take a break in a sustainable way, how you can take a break that will be different, and what not to do.

And I will tell you that there is one key piece of information that you have to keep in mind if you are thinking about taking a break. For so long, the focus of all of my breaks, all of my decisions, was to just cut alcohol out. I was so fed up. My focus was all about removing a substance, and that substance of course was alcohol. That was where all of my focus was.

"I just need to remove this substance from my life." That was where all of my mental energy was focused. I shifted from focusing on removing a substance during a period of a break ... which frankly never worked, was never sustainable, and my desire never changed ... and shifted to thinking about a break period as becoming a person of substance.

I love thinking about it this way. The difference between removing a substance, removing alcohol when you're taking a break, and shifting to becoming a person of substance. What do I mean by that? What do I mean by a person of substance? I think about it like this. A person of substance is someone who uses her life the way she wants, right?

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The way she wants to use her life, rather than what others want. And a lot of you can identify with this. Now, a lot of you are using your life the way you think you should, not the way you want. And I will tell you that that always appears when it comes to drinking.

So the people that I work with, my clients, will say, “It was just so hard because people expect me to be drinking. They expect that I’m going to be drinking when I go to this wedding/ this party/ I just meet up with my girlfriends/ we’re watching the game. Everyone has all these expectations and so I feel like I have to meet those expectations.”

And this is what I’m talking about; something that you’re shifting away from. Instead of being someone who’s just living your life the way you think you should, the way you think others expect you to ... and that always will connect back to your drinking ... starting to use your life the way you want. That’s the first thing.

The second thing, when I’m talking about a person of substance, is someone who is willing to let go of what is easy and embrace what is hard. Look, alcohol is always easy. It is easy to access, it is easy relief, it is easy pleasure, and you know what, there will always be a good excuse. Trust me, there will always be a good excuse for why you should have a drink.

Becoming a person of substance meant that I had to purposely direct my brain away from easy in a different direction. I had to start to become someone who was willing to do things that were hard, that were difficult, instead of always having that easy solution, which frankly, was easy in the moment but wasn’t serving me in the long run.

And to me, a person of substance is someone who shows up for herself no matter what. I will tell you I was not showing up for myself when I felt awkward, I felt insecure, I felt bored, I felt lonely, and I turned to having a drink in order to make myself feel better. I wasn’t there for myself. And I

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think this piece is so important because the idea that you know that you can always count on yourself is huge.

So often with this habit of drinking more than you intend, drinking more than you want, people will say to me – and I felt this way as well – “I feel like I can’t trust myself.” And that is such a painful thought, to think I can’t trust myself. And so that’s what I mean when I’m talking about learning how to show up for yourself no matter what. Learning that you can trust yourself, you can count on yourself.

This is what I’m talking about. Now, this was a huge shift. There’s a fabulous book out there by Brené Brown. It’s called *Daring Greatly*, and actually, the title of the book comes from a speech given by Teddy Roosevelt in 1910. I think that this quote is so perfect when you start to shift your mind from focusing on a break period as being just about removing a substance, and instead shifting to becoming a person of substance. So I want to read that quote to you.

“It’s not the critic who counts, not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes up short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly...”

I love that quote. I love it, and to me, that is a person of substance. Someone who is in the arena, who is trying, who is falling down, but who is getting back up and trying again.

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That, to me, is a person of substance. And I will tell you, if you can make that shift from just removing a substance to thinking about, “How can I become a person of substance? How can I become my best self? How can I become the person that I want to be? Who can always count on herself, who can trust herself, who can do hard things, who uses her life the way she wants,” that, I promise to you, will be transformative.

When I shifted my own focus from removing alcohol, removing the substance, to becoming a person of substance, everything changed for me. And the reason why everything changed is because this shift, it broadened my focus. It allowed me to start to understand the habit.

It allowed me to start to come up with different solutions to meet the obstacles I was facing head on. It sent me down a path of entirely new and different approach, and this was a huge difference for me, and I say this as someone who had taken breaks over and over again in her 20s.

When I made this shift, everything went from the break, the period of not drinking, feeling all about restriction and deprivation and rules and resisting how I felt, to all of a sudden, becoming this process of growing and learning and challenging myself. And I will tell you, that was so much more exciting.

Yes, it was challenging, for sure, but it was so much more exciting to be in a place of growing and learning and challenging, rather than restriction, deprivation, and rules. And so that’s really the first piece that I want to share with you. I really believe that taking a break – if you’re just cutting out alcohol and that’s it, you’ll learn something for sure.

But there is so much more available to you, and there is so much more that you can grow and become and start to really change your desire, instead of doing what I did all those times, which was just gritting my teeth and bearing it. So that really is the key mental shift, the key mindset that you need to start to embrace.

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But I do want to talk about six different things that you really should not do, I think, during a break period if you want to be successful, and you want to have this period be something more than just saying no, something more than just removing a substance, and actually a period of personal growth, a period of learning how to not only understand your habits, but change your habits and change your desire.

So the first thing not to do when you take a break is to place your focus squarely on alcohol, to have the entire break period just be about, “Am I drinking or am I not drinking?” Instead, what you can do is start to understand how the habit cycle works. Look, what happens for most people when they decide, “Okay, maybe I want to take a break. Maybe I just need to cut this out for a while, I just want to clean my act up.”

But what they end up doing is saying, “Alcohol is the problem, so I’m just going to focus on drinking” and it becomes all about, “Am I drinking or am I not drinking?” But you know what, alcohol isn’t the problem. I know, I know that kind of blows your mind a little bit. But alcohol isn’t the problem.

The problem is that you have created a habit that you have no idea how to change, and there’s nothing wrong with you that you don’t know how to change it. No one has ever explained how the habit cycle works. No one has ever given you the tools to learn how to change it. You just don’t have the steps. You don’t understand why fulfilling the habit is so compelling for your brain. You don’t understand how desire is just perpetuating more desire.

And so that to me is key. That, to me, really is the first place to start. Instead of just focusing on, “Am I drinking? Am I not drinking?” and all my attention is there, it’s really shifting to understand, “Okay, there’s a habit here. What’s driving it? What created it? How does my brain work? How can I start to unwind it?” Shifting your focus there not only is it more empowering, but I will tell you this, it doesn’t just apply to your drinking.

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We have habits in all areas of our life, and so many people that I work with start this work, they start learning about the habit cycle because they want to change their drinking, but it's a skill that they learn and they use and they apply to all different aspects of their lives, areas where they aren't getting the results that they want. So that's the first piece.

The second thing not to do, and you'll hear me talk about this on the podcast all the time, is use your willpower to resist urges. That's huge. Instead of using willpower to resist urges, what you can do is understand what is really creating your desire. And I always say this. It's your thoughts. It's what you're thinking. If you are using willpower, if you are using all your mental energy to resist and to grit your teeth and just get through that moment, it may work. It may work temporarily. I will tell you that.

I used willpower for a long time as well. The problem is you will never give yourself the change to see the inner workings of your habit. You cannot access your thinking if you are resisting and gritting your teeth because all of your energy is just in the resisting. I think about it this way. Willpower is kind of like using all your might to hold a door shut. All of your weight, all of your energy, pressed against that door that wants to open. It's exhausting.

But here's the thing. The question really is, why are you so fixated on keeping the door shut? What are you so afraid of that is behind the door? All you're going to find there is an urge. All you're going to find there is an expectation from your brain that it wants to be rewarded, because you have taught it that it will be rewarded. But an urge is not some big, bad monster. It's just your brain saying, "Hey, it's five, we're at a bar, we're at a party, whatever it is, I'm used to being rewarded so where's my reward?"

That expectation from your brain, that urge that you feel, it cannot harm you. It cannot make you do anything. But all of us, myself included for a very long time, acted like the urge was the boogeyman, and I had to shove

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it behind the door and put all my might against the door and keep it closed and not look at it.

Using willpower to resist your urges instead of understanding what is really creating them, understanding what is really creating your desire, what you do by allowing an urge, observing an urge, that is the big difference, and that is huge when you're trying to take a different kind of break.

Number three of what not to do is isolating and avoiding, and boy, did I do this one a lot in my 20s. Instead of isolating and avoiding, you can actually use whatever feels like an obstacle to be the launch pad for your growth, the launch pad for a new way to do things. I will tell you that for many of my break periods during my 20s, I would just stop going out. I would stop seeing people, I would avoid friends, all because I didn't want to have to come up against this desire, and my fear of what if.

But obstacles really are your path forward. So you have to know what they are, and you have to be willing to put yourself in the way of an obstacle and learn how to do something different. I mean, you can do this without trying to deal with any of your obstacles, but I will tell you, what will happen is you'll become a really good introspective hermit who never sees anyone, is never around alcohol, only has friendships with people who don't drink.

And my guess is, that's not the life that you want to lead. It certainly isn't the life that I wanted to lead. It certainly wasn't realistic for me. But that's how I felt so often when I was taking these unsustainable breaks that I was just like, "Well, I just have to isolate and avoid. I just have to hide away from the world."

Number four of what not to do when you're taking a break is telling yourself, repeating the lie, that you need relief from how you feel. This is a big one because alcohol is a quick and easy fix to change how you feel. But the question is, why do you so urgently need to change how you feel?

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The only reason why is because your brain thinks something has gone terribly wrong when you feel a negative emotion, right? My brain thought this forever. “Oh god, we’re feeling awkward, we’re feeling insecure, we’re feeling lonely” – whatever it is – “something has gone terribly wrong.”

Here’s the thing, nothing has gone wrong. You are meant to have negative emotions. All of us are. They are part of being human, they are part of life. But so often, we get in the habit of feeling a little, “I don’t know, I just feel off, I just feel a little uncomfortable, I just need to take the edge off”, and we train our brain that when we feel a negative emotion, we have to immediately move away from it instead of teaching our brain that negative emotions are a part of life, and they’re totally survivable.

This idea that we should be happy and joyful all the time, it’s not only unrealistic, but it’s part of what gets you into this mess of always seeking this quick and easy pleasure. You don’t need immediate relief. You need to understand why you feel the way you do in the first place, and that’s why I’m always talking about the think-feel-act cycle.

You have to understand that your feelings are created by what you’re thinking. And you also have to understand that no emotion can ever harm you. This is how you learn emotional resilience, and let me tell you, your life will be so different once you get to a place where your brain no longer treats any negative emotion as a sign that something has gone terribly wrong and it must be immediately fixed.

Number five of what not to do when you’re taking a break is to tell yourself you can’t drink, and in the process, create a lot of restriction and deprivation for yourself. Now, I know for some of you, you’re like, “Wait, what? What are you talking about?” But here’s the thing. I think this piece is so important.

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I would take a break and I would think to myself, “You can’t drink Rachel, you can’t drink. You can’t drink.” But at the same time I would also be thinking, “God, I hate this, this is so unfair, why me? Why can’t I drink like everybody else?” Can’t-can’t-can’t. The more I thought it, the more it was creating all this restriction and deprivation.

And the thing was is that I was ignoring the fact that you know what, I was an adult woman with free will. No one could stop me from drinking if I really wanted to. And the same goes for you. You get to make decisions about how you want to lead your life. You get to make choices about whether or not you want to drink. And if you go into a break period telling yourself, “I can’t, I can’t, I can’t, I can’t”, you will be creating a lot of restriction and a lot of deprivation, and I promise, that will not go well for you.

Instead, what you can do is actually acknowledge that you’re choosing to do this. This is a choice. You’re making a choice to take a break. You are making a choice not to drink, even when your brain – even when your lower brain is like, “No, dude, I really want this. I got to have this. I was expecting it all day.” You can make that choice, and I will tell you that I will feel so much better when you drop the can’t and recognize that it’s always a choice. It’s always something that you’re choosing to do, even if it’s difficult. Even if it’s challenging, it’s still a choice.

And the last thing not to do when you are taking a break is to try to use shame as a motivator. Shame will keep you stuck. You will never stop hearing me say this. If you are going into a break, thinking of all the ways that you’re a screw up or how something must be wrong with you, or you just can’t get this right. You just are weak-willed and lack discipline. Whatever it is, whatever thoughts you have like these, negative thoughts that are creating shame for you, I promise it will just slow down the process of change.

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And usually, because most people don't clean up their shame, they go into that break period feeling really shameful and they continue to feel really shameful during the break period, is that for most people, it leads them in the opposite direction. You start to feel bad for long enough, and your brain starts to look around and say, "Hey, don't we give ourselves relief when we feel this way? I mean, I feel terrible. Is there some sort of relief I can get here?" Shame is never a good motivator. Never.

So here's the thing, you need a different motivator. Shame isn't sustainable, so what is it? And that thing is something exciting that you are working towards. I've talked about this before on the podcast, but you need a compelling reason that will sustain you when things get tough, when things get difficult. Because changing a habit isn't easy, but it's so worth it. But you need to reconnect with why it's worth it. Who do you want to be on the other side of this? Who do you want to be when you're not constantly thinking about this habit and worrying about this habit, right?

So that's the thing. You have to find a different way to motivate yourself. I will tell you, when I stopped focusing on just removing alcohol, just removing this substance, and instead worked to become a person of substance, I just had to let go of all the methods I had previously used to take a break. I had to let go of the willpower and the isolation and telling myself that I couldn't handle negative emotions, and all the deprivation and all the restriction, and all the shame.

And letting go of all those things meant growing in new, unexpected ways. But I will tell you, it is the only way to take a break that I know of that will not only help you change the habit, but also help you become someone different. It will help you become someone who knows how to use your life the way you want to, and do what you want to, rather than what others expect from you. It will help you become someone who is willing to let go of the easy path, and embrace things that are challenging and difficult, and that my friends, I promise, has much more application than just with your drinking.

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And it will help you become a person who shows up for herself no matter what, and that one is so key. Knowing that you can always count on yourself, you can always see yourself through. Whatever is thrown your way; you don't need a glass of wine to take the edge off. You don't need to drown your sorrows. You don't need to run away from how you're feeling. That will change everything for you.

And so I want you to start thinking about a break – if it's something that you want to do, start thinking about it in a different way instead of just, “Am I drinking or am I not drinking?” Instead of just focusing on removing the substance, shift your mind. See how it can be something so different and so much bigger.

I really encourage you to think about this. I want you to actually go back and re-listen to this podcast, because there's a lot here; there's a lot here for you to unpack and for you to think about, methods that you may have used in the past, and how you can start shifting and learning new ways.

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](https://www.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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