

Ep #420: Are Rules the Problem?



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Rachel Hart

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Ep #420: Are Rules the Problem?

Fair warning, this conversation might break your brain a little bit. I'm talking with fellow coach Adriana Cloud about the downside of setting rules for yourself when it comes to drinking, how they can work against you and what it really means to trust yourself around alcohol.

This is episode 420 and you're going to learn why we take such a counterintuitive approach to drinking less.

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.

Rachel Hart: Alright everybody, welcome back. So I have Adriana Cloud here with us today and we were talking about parameters around drinking.

And this is something that comes up a lot inside the membership, a lot when we are working with people because the approach that I think is so important is that no one is here to tell you or to tell another person, this is the relationship that you should have with alcohol. Or this is what your drinking is supposed to look like. Or this is the accepted appropriate amount of drinks that you can have in a day or during a week.

Now, there's lots of information out there when it comes to what doctors or health agencies think is the correct amount. But what we're really trying to get you to think about and everyone that we work with to think about is if you were to put yourself in charge, because truly you are the one in charge.

What would it look like for you? What would it feel good? What kind of relationship with alcohol would feel good for you?

And that I think is often a very uncomfortable place to be in, to be the person who is determining for yourself, what is right for you because so many people when they come to this work, when they start to decide, I

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want to change my drinking. I want to drink less, I want to stop, I want to experiment with breaks, I need some time away, whatever it is.

When you have that knowing inside of you that something about your relationship with alcohol feels off and that something needs to change.

What often accompanies that is this deep sense of not being able to trust yourself.

Adriana Cloud: Oh yes. Oh yes, that is so familiar.

Rachel: So familiar. And so when you are in this place of I'm here because I can't trust myself. I can't be trusted. I set rules for myself and I don't follow them. I say that I'm going to be good and then I go overboard.

I say never again, I'm never going to be that stupid again. And then here I was waking up the next day, I was that stupid again.

When you are coming to this work from that place, which both of us understand, we have both been there. We both deeply feel how just painful. I think that's really the word for it is painful that feels to be in this place of I cannot trust myself.

To then be met with what we are saying is, hey, you're in charge. Adriana just made the most amazing face. What do you mean I'm in charge? I'm not supposed to be in charge. I can't trust myself. I can't be trusted and I have so much evidence, right?

This is the thing that I struggled with for the longest time was, let's just look at my long history of bad behavior with alcohol. Right? We've got all this evidence here and now you're hearing a message of, you want me to decide? I'm in charge? This is up to me? You're not going to tell me what's right, what's wrong, what's good, what's bad?

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That can be very challenging for people and I think what brings us to what we want to talk about today is people often will say, okay, but what are the parameters?

What do you mean if we're not going to talk about serving sizes or units or whatever? What are the parameters that I'm supposed to use?

So, I mean, just tell me a little bit about what you hear from people inside the membership or the sorts of things, the sorts of questions that come up most often.

Adriana: So, one question that comes up is, should I have rules at all? Because what people are trying to avoid is this black and white thinking of when I drink, it's bad and if I don't drink, it's good.

And to step away from that sort of black and white thinking, which is what we encourage people to do. And to get more curious about if you did drink, why did you drink? If and if you didn't drink, what happened then? What helped you to not drink or how do you feel about that decision?

But there is also, as you say, just this fundamental lack of trust in ourselves to make decisions. And this is so familiar to me, just brought me back to where I was when I was doing this work of what do you mean I get to decide? Clearly, I cannot be trusted to make decisions for myself. So I wanted someone to tell me what to do.

And it can be disorienting to be told, oh well, you go figure it out. Look inwards, get curious and pay attention. And so what we see in the membership is people coming with, okay, this is the rule I've made for myself. Is this okay? Is it okay to have a rule?

And then what happens still is, okay, I've made this rule for myself. I'm only going to drink on Friday and Saturday.

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But then Sunday came and I had an argument with my daughter and I ended up drinking. And so now I feel terrible because I've broken my rule.

Rachel: Yeah. I mean, there's a couple things here. One is just to back up and talk about why I think it's very important to empower people and to why I take this position is because at the end of the day, it truly is up to you.

Even if you look to some outside authority and you decide that you're going to follow what that person says or what this doctor says or what this health agency says or whomever you're looking to.

Even if you decide that's the case, at the end of the day, it's still you, right? It's still up to you. You're the one making the decision. Nobody is going to follow you around and monitor you and say, no, you're not supposed to do that. Remember what I said?

I think that just the acknowledgment of we're saying that it's up to you because it truly is up to you. You're really the only one who is making this decision unless somehow I can restrict your freedom.

And even in that case, I mean, even when people have their freedom restricted, they still have access. They still find ways to access alcohol.

That's one thing to keep in mind. The other thing, when people come and say, okay, I've made a rule for myself. Is this rule okay? What I see is that ninety-nine percent of the time, the rule is focused either on a number.

So it's focused on I've made a rule that I can only have x amount. So it's focused on a number or it's focused on a time of day or a time of week, right? So that may be, well, I never drink before noon or I never drink before 6 p.m. Right?

So we're setting some kind of time of day or what you said, which is, okay, well, I'm allowed to drink on the weekends, right? I can't drink Monday through Friday, but I can drink Friday, Saturday, Sunday. And that to me is really fundamentally what the problem is.

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The focus ends up being on quantity and it ends up being on a where the sun happens to be in the sky or how the earth is rotating rather than really understanding the decision around why you want to drink.

And so I think that's the place where I'm often encouraging people to be less about come up with a rule. Let's not focus or to be less about focusing on numbers or time and more to be understanding, are there certain, are there certain times when certain archetypes are activated where you're saying, I don't want to reinforce this archetype.

I don't want to reinforce for my brain that the way to truly feel good, truly feel rewarded after working hard is by drinking. I don't want to reinforce with my brain when I'm having big emotions that I can't handle them on my own without a drink.

I don't want to reinforce in my brain that I can't feel comfortable around people or I can't drop my guard unless I'm drinking. That's just a completely different conversation than, okay, I'm allowed to have two, right? Or I'm allowed to have this amount or I'm allowed to drink this when I'm with this person, but not with that person.

Because it just I find what happens is that the rules generally act as if the archetypes aren't there, act as if this kind of deeper desire for drinking isn't there. And so that's why I think it's so important to really understand more of what is my motivation here.

Now, that isn't to also say that you can't set boundaries with yourself. But I want people to start first from the place of understanding, how do I want If I want to incorporate alcohol in my life, what do I want that to look like?

What do I want to be reinforcing in my brain and what do I want to make sure that doesn't look like? And that's a conversation that has to go beyond just, well, I just want to make sure that I never drink so much that I do something stupid.

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And that I think is what is challenging because I mean it's essentially asking people to go outside of this mentality that we have not just around alcohol, but we have around food and we have around money.

It is to go beyond this kind of really black and white thinking of this is good, this is bad, this is right, this is wrong and really understand the deeper motivations.

Adriana: Yeah, and that is so important because what happens when we think about setting a rule? It's looking to something outside of us to make a decision for us. So, oh, it's 7 o'clock, I'm allowed to drink. Oh, it's Friday, I'm allowed to drink. The sun is in this place in the sky, I'm allowed to drink. I'm with these people, I'm allowed.

And so, as you say, that prohibits the curiosity that is required to check inward and actually see, okay, what am I looking for the alcohol to do for me in this moment?

What archetype is activated? Am I trying to numb an emotion? Am I actually thinking that oh I need a reward because I did this wonderful thing today?

Or am I anxious with people and I'm hoping to numb some anxiety there? What is actually happening?

And when we decide ahead of time, oh it's Friday, so I'm allowed to drink. We don't stop to check in what's really happening. And let's say if someone has decided, okay I'm going to have two drinks, they don't pause to check before the first one. How am I feeling? Do I really need the alcohol? What is happening in my body? What is happening in my mind?

And if they've already decided to have a second one after that, they don't pause after the first one either to evaluate, was this enjoyable? What did it do for me? How am I feeling now? Do I really need the second one? What am I hoping the second one will do? Because they're already on autopilot thinking that well I've allowed myself to have it, so I'm going to have it.

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And so that's it. We've sort of we've checked out at that point. We're not really in touch with ourselves and our experience to see if we're still enjoying that drink or what it's really doing.

Rachel: It is, rules very often when you're setting this rule and then you look to the rule and then it becomes this is when I'm not allowed and this is when I am allowed.

I mean it really is the opposite of mindfulness because you said you're not checking in with yourself. It's just about the rule. And I think that that willingness to just understand, hey, we can look at, I don't know, what are there fifty-two Fridays in a year? That's probably wrong, but something. There's fifty-something Fridays in a year.

Your Friday evenings are going to be very different. What happens during those Fridays are going to be very different. And just creating this rule of, okay, so I'm allowed to drink because it's the weekend is not taking into account what is happening in your life and what is happening with your desire. And I think the other thing that happens, in some ways what I find is it will increase desire sometimes and it will increase often the Release archetype.

So what I'm talking about here is when you're in this place of I'm not allowed and then I am allowed. I can drink in this situation, I can't drink in this situation. Which is what a lot of people do. They do it not just with alcohol. We do it with food, we do it with money, we do it with all sorts of things.

When you're doing that, you're constantly trying to bat your desire away when it appears, when it appears outside of the quote-unquote allowed time for the desire to be there. You're constantly batting it away with I can't, I'm not allowed, I'm not allowed.

And for many people, that actually creates resentment. For many people, that actually doesn't feel very good to spend a lot of time telling

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themselves, you can't, you're not allowed to, you can't, you're not allowed to.

And so it's building up a lot of negative emotion. Which then you start to see when you are saying yes, your desire often will feel stronger, but because you've built up all this negative emotion around it as well.

So, you have this piece happening. And then what I find happens so often is people just get to this point where it's they don't want to follow the rules anymore. They're sick of following the rules. And this especially comes up with the Release archetype. This was a big archetype that came up in my own life for a very long time.

I was like, but I'm good all the time. And I follow the rules all the time. And I feel I'm always following the rules. I feel I felt so often I had so little say in my own life because I was always following everybody's rules.

And then drinking for me became this place where I got to rebel, where I got to have a say. Here's the thing. When the especially for the Release archetype, when you're in that place of wanting to rebel, feeling you don't have a say, feeling you are constantly in this place of being so good all the time and where is my reward?

Guess what? You're not going to drink very mindfully or moderately in those moments because the whole point is to kind of throw off your shackles and prove to yourself that you can do whatever you want to do.

I mean this is kind of the crazy trap that people get into, this idea of, okay, well I need a rule in order to rain myself in, and I don't feel safe without the rule. But then constantly feeling as if these you are kind of at the mercy of the rules or feeling resentful of the rules and wanting to always prove that you don't have to follow the rules, that you don't have to be bound by them.

And I swung back and forth between these places of listen, when I follow the rules, I'm the best at following the rules. Nobody, I dot all the I's and

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cross all the T's and I do everything and I do my taxes really early. I'm just I do all the rules.

And that actually, I think, created all of this pressure for me. Because of course, I was scared of what would happen if I didn't follow the rules, right? All this pressure that then I swung all the way to the other end of the spectrum and was just when that Release archetype was activated for me and I was in that place of I just need to rebel.

I mean, I was this was not slow, mindful drinking. This was, let's just see how quickly, how fast I can get drunk, right? And really just get to that place of I just don't give a F about anything.

Adriana: Yeah. Talk about reaching a fuck-it moment. And what happens in those moments when we're so focused on the rule, then it becomes about the rule.

It's no longer about the drinking really. What we're trying to get better at is to follow the rules. And rather than getting better at understanding the drinking habit.

And so when that is the approach to drink less is just, oh, I'm just going to make some rules for myself and then try to follow them. Okay, what you're actually getting better at... or not getting better at, but what the only skill you're actually practicing in that moment is, can I follow a rule or not?

You're not actually practicing the skill of listening to yourself or identifying emotions or hearing what the craving is saying. You're not doing any of that work. You're really just focused on at this point, am I following the rule or not? What can I do to follow the rule or do I want to follow the rule. It just becomes all about the rule and drinking just happens to be the symptom of how that rule manifests.

Rachel: Yeah. And again, this is not to say that therefore the answer is to have zero boundaries in your life. I don't live a life with zero boundaries. I do have boundaries for myself. I drink very rarely at this point in my life.

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But when I do, one of the boundaries that I have for myself is it is not about dealing with a negative emotion. Right? If there is a hint of I don't want to feel the way that I feel right now, no, that's not happening.

That is a boundary for me, but notice it's so different than setting a rule around quantity and it really is also it's that kind of boundary is forcing me to have a conversation with myself to really understand, okay, what is actually going on here right now?

What is coupled with this desire? Yes, okay, the drink looks tasty, but is there something else? It really it's a boundary that forces me to have a bigger conversation.

And I think that's ultimately the skill that we all need and I think both you and I practice all the time. And that's it's less about the ultimate decision that we decide to make around alcohol and how we want it in our life.

And it's more the skill of, do I just know how to have this internal conversation? How to go beneath the effort thoughts, how to go beneath the I just really the way it tastes or I've just always been fill in the blank for whatever your favorite drink is, right?

I've always just been a big beer drinker. I've always been into craft cocktails. Do you know how to kind of go beneath the surface and just I mean it really is have a relationship with yourself, have a conversation with yourself. And not just exist on this kind of level of autopilot.

That is what we are trying to help people with and I do think it kind of breaks people's brains when they start doing this work. Because it is so different from so much of what is out there which is okay, we just need to get you to follow this rule.

We've decided what the number is, this is the healthy number, whether it's some people will say, well the healthy number is you shouldn't have

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anything at all. Or the healthy is, no, actually, you can do one drink a night or you can do two drinks a night or is to go beyond that and to start having the conversation.

I mean so many of the exercises in the ultimate guide to drinking less, which is the kind of foundational text that we use inside the membership. So many of them are really about different ways to pause and slow down, and ask yourself, okay, what is really actually happening for me in this moment? And am I even willing to have that conversation?

For a long time, I had to recognize that there was a part of me that was unwilling to have that conversation with myself. That I was just oh, I don't want to. No, thank you.

Adriana: No, thank you. Leave me alone.

Rachel: No, I don't want to. We're not talking about this. I just want to have the thing that I want to have, right? No conversation needed.

But just to even understand that is actually a huge moment just to even understand, oh, I have so much resistance to even starting the conversation with myself.

Adriana: Yeah. And I think it comes back to having self-trust. And I think how we begin to build that is just, can I trust myself to be honest with myself about what's happening? Can I trust myself just to name a craving? Can I trust myself to not beat myself up if I drink, if I break the quote-unquote rule?

And that's where we begin to this radical self-honesty and self-trust and self-acceptance. That's what happens when, whether you have rules or not, to be so present with your experience and to trust yourself to really have that connection to recognize, oh, this is what happened. I was having a hard day.

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But even just that, even that honesty right there is so much more useful than, well I broke the rule, that's it and just leave it at that.

Rachel: And to see that I'm not a good rule follower, right? Yeah.

Adriana: That's all we've established. That's all we've established. I'm just not good at following rules or I'm.

Rachel: This is what was so confusing for me for the longest time. I was but I'm such a good rule follower. I'm just not really a good rule follower in these areas of my life.

Which was utterly confusing to me because again, I was only operating from the level of these are the rules that I follow and these are the rules that I set for myself and I don't seem to follow and I don't understand what am I a good rule follower? Am I a bad rule follower?

I can't I couldn't make sense of myself, but because I didn't even know to have a conversation. That's the thing. I did discover, as I started to do my own exploration with myself, I did discover at some point that I was unwilling to have the conversation, but at the get-go, I didn't even know that there was a conversation to be had.

Adriana: Oh, yeah. That was me too. For a while it was just unawareness. And then when I had some level of awareness, I was very good at shutting down that part of my brain that was hey, you know, this probably isn't how you want to be feeling.

No, I don't want to think about that. Let me just know. I'm not interested in having this conversation or thinking about tomorrow or questioning why I am reaching for the bottle. I could hear that little voice, but as you say, I just wasn't interested in having that conversation at all. I did not feel equipped to handle that and really be honest with myself.

Rachel: I will just say, I think so much of the work is really about figuring out how do I trust myself without also making that trust contingent on, I got to

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be perfect, right? I'll trust myself when I prove to myself that I'm going to stop screwing up and I'm going to stop making the same mistake.

I think that's the other piece that gets people very caught up is they're yeah, yeah, sure, I want to trust myself. But I'm just going to I'm going to wait until I can be sure that I'm never going to do this stupid thing again. I'm never going to drink this much again. I'm never...

This is the thing. This is why I love this work and I think both of us love this work so much is because listen, learning to trust myself, first off, it is it is an ongoing thing. It is an ongoing area of my life that I continue to work on. I continue to find areas of my life where I try to outsource feeling safe and try to outsource the trust to something that is not me.

And all of this, the entire journey that I have been on and I think that you have been on as well, the entire journey for me really started with understanding that that lack of trust, it started with alcohol, but it's in so many areas of my life.

And it's not I walk around either at this point, everything's amazing and I have perfect trust in myself and I know. I think that is, to me, this is just an ongoing kind of part of the human experience work that I don't see myself ever coming to a place where I'm well, that's it. I figured it out and I trust myself a hundred percent.

But I do feel a lot of trust in areas of my life and trust with myself, but because I'm willing to have the conversations. I guess that's what it is. Every place where I have found oh, I'm trying to outsource trust to something else or someone else again. It's always a place where I'm oh, I didn't realize there was a conversation to be had there.

It's that not even knowing what you don't know. Not even knowing that there could be a conversation happening cause it's just I just didn't even know.

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Adriana: Yeah, yeah. And the way it was manifesting for me was for a long time, my self-trust was conditional. Well, I'll trust myself only if I do the right thing.

If I trust myself to act a certain way, then then it's okay. So that that is a very surface level trust. Basically it's I follow the rules or then that's it. I no longer have.

Rachel: Well, it's you're on a tight rope. I mean this is why I and I work with this with so often with people. I find so many people will they'll decide, okay, listen, I'm going to remove alcohol from my life. And they will have months, years of not drinking and still inside will feel as if, but what if it slips away? Right? But what if something happens?

Because they're kind of saying the trust is only in me being perfect. The trust is only in I have to do the quote-unquote right thing. That's the source of it. But if the source of your trust is knowing that you're never going to make a mistake, knowing that you're never going to slip up, it is not going to feel a very strong foundation that you're on top of. And so here's the thing, people can come to, it's really not about the place that you come to with alcohol. It's not about oh, so then the only way that you can trust yourself is if you incorporate alcohol into your life.

It's not about that at all. It really is understanding that the trust is the willingness to have your back, no matter what. To have the hard conversation with yourself, no matter what.

If you didn't ask the question in the moment, which guess what, sometimes we won't, that you won't just turn away from what happened and say, okay, well I just okay, let's start over again, start from day zero and this time I'm not going to make a mistake. This time I'm not going to screw up.

Is that willingness of whenever I realize I haven't had the conversation, I'm willing to have the conversation now. I'm willing to I'm willing to understand what was really going on, what was my desire really about? What was I

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trying to either seek out or what was I trying to avoid? What was going on here?

When that's why I feel I have much more trust in myself than I used to, not because I look and say, well, look at my amazing track record here of all these things that I'm doing right in my life. But because I just time and time again, I have shown myself, I'm willing to have that conversation.

I'm willing to do that. I'm willing to talk about the things that I'd rather avoid. And even if that conversation is only internal, I'm willing to have that kind of honesty with myself.

Adriana: Yeah. Yeah. That's it, isn't it? To me, it also comes back to the willingness to be honest with myself about what's going on and hand in hand with that, knowing that I'm not going to beat myself up.

So that's why there's an exercise in the guide, building the muscle of self-compassion, which I think is so important and fits in so well here is because when you know that you're not going to shame yourself after that and be so critical and call yourself names, that's when it's easier to have those conversations.

That's what allows that honesty to be there because you know, oh here's something for me to look at, knowing that I'm not going to beat myself up. Let me really be honest and say what's happening here and sit with whatever feelings come up. That's where we make progress and really get to understand our desires and what's really going on underneath these rules we're trying to set.

Rachel: Yeah. So I hope that's the thing that everybody takes away from today's conversation. If you find yourself wanting to say, well, I just I just need a rule that this is my limit of how much. Or I just need a rule that when I'm allowed to drink and when I'm not allowed to drink.

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I hope that you will just take away the curiosity about what understanding or what information might I be preventing myself from accessing by just setting an arbitrary rule?

And if I'm setting this rule for myself, am I also at the same time, when my desire appears telling myself, no, you can't, you're not allowed to? And then what happens for me? What happens with my desire when I do that over and over again? And how then does that show up in my drinking. So again, I think this is very personal in terms of the decision that you come to with the how you want alcohol in your life.

But when you start to understand the archetypes, when you start to understand what your brain is learning, I really do think that gives you a much better foundation to then decide.

It's like a much clearer picture to see oh, I definitely see that I don't want to strengthen this belief that my brain currently has around drinking or I know, I definitely don't want to add to this particular archetype.

I can see over here maybe where with a lot of awareness and mindfulness, maybe this particular archetype is something that feels okay for me and it feels with awareness and consciousness, this doesn't feel it's necessarily a problem.

But that's just such a very different conversation to have than to create this kind of what I'm allowed to, when I'm not allowed to and to focus just on numbers.

So I really hope all of you guys will take that away. It's just really about having that conversation and having that willingness to have a little curiosity about maybe there is something, there's something here beyond just my desire. And if I'm willing to engage with what that is, it's a lot easier to make better choices around alcohol and with your drinking.

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Adriana: Yeah, basically, the question that's coming up for me is, if I wasn't setting rules, what conversation would I be having with myself then? And then go and have that conversation with yourself.

Rachel: That's a perfect way to end this episode. Thank you so much.

Adriana: Thanks Rachel.

Rachel: Alright, we'll see you all 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.