

## Ep #423: Explaining Overdrinking



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With Your Host

**Rachel Hart**

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## Ep #423: Explaining Overdrinking

When you wake up after drinking too much and you immediately regret what happened, what is your first thought? What I have found is that pretty much everyone shares the same version of two very similar but very different thoughts. In this episode, 423, I'm explaining what those thoughts are, where they actually come from, and why they are such a problem when it comes to changing your relationship with alcohol.

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 I'm talking today about a pattern that I've noticed in basically everyone I've ever worked with. It does not matter how old you are. It doesn't matter where you're from or your gender or how far you got in school. It doesn't matter your socioeconomic status. I have been coaching people on their drinking and their relationship with alcohol for almost a decade. And I will tell you that across the board, the same version of this pattern always shows up. And it always gets in the way of attempts to change and to drink less or to stop drinking. And this pattern is a huge part of why you are stuck right now. So it's really important that you understand it, you understand what it looks like, where it comes from, and what you need to do instead.

So here's what this pattern looks like. After drinking too much and then waking up and wishing that you hadn't had that much to drink, you will consciously or unconsciously think one of two thoughts about why it happened. And many of you will think both of these thoughts. And these thoughts are, one, I fucked up. That's thought number one. Or two, I must be fucked up. That's the second thought.

Now, listen, they sound very similar, but they are actually very different. And they shine a light on what we all have been taught about why some people

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drink too much and why some people struggle to cut back or struggle to stop drinking. So I'm gonna dive into these two thoughts today because I really want you to understand the story that you are telling yourself about your drinking and how these thoughts, which may seem very insignificant at the time, I want you to really understand how they are keeping you stuck.

So let's talk about this first thought, I fucked up. Now my version usually sounded like, I fucked up again. I was sure that I was to blame. I was at fault. I was stupid. I was reckless. I was just someone who was incapable of learning my lesson. So that thought really can be boiled down to, I did something bad and I should have known better.

This thought, I fucked up, is a byproduct of explaining behaviors that on the surface don't make a whole lot of sense. So I'm gonna explain what I mean by this. So when you think about your behaviors around alcohol that seem kind of illogical to you. So maybe it's like, why would I drink that much if I know I'm gonna feel terrible the next day? Or why would I drink that much if I know that sometimes I do things that are really reckless or maybe put myself or other people in danger? Or why would I drink that much if I know again and again, I'm gonna wake up embarrassed by my behavior? It really feels like so much about our drinking doesn't make sense.

And one of the very first ways that society tried to explain these illogical behaviors was what we call the moral model of addiction. It was our attempt to explain something that appeared irrational on the surface. And that explanation was, what explains all of this irrational behavior is a failing of your personhood, a failing of your morality, your inability to distinguish between right and wrong and good and bad. And when you aren't able or when you're struggling to decipher between right and wrong or good and bad, the solution then in the moral model of addiction is to align yourself with religious or spiritual values that will show you the path, that will lead the way.

This is why things like AA's 12 steps focus so much on being a better person, admitting the natures of your wrongs, asking God to remove

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defects of character and shortcomings, making amends. The idea when you boil it down here is you were bad, you were wrong, and now the solution is to align yourself with a more righteous path.

And I think it's important to note that AA, when it was created almost a century ago, so in the 1930s, back then, a lot of behaviors that were seen as deviant or extreme were widely regarded as spiritual problems. So society looked at deviant or extreme behaviors or illogical behaviors and decided the solution is to be more devout, because only God could save you. Only God could put you on the righteous path.

Now listen, I think there's a lot to be said about aligning your life with values like love and honesty and integrity and harmony and generosity. I think that can be an amazing thing. I just don't think it's the key to drinking less or the key to changing any habit. Trying to exorcise the badness out of you is not going to work because habits have nothing to do with right and wrong or good and bad. They have to do with an automatic and unconscious thought pattern in the brain. And those patterns don't form based on our ideas about good and bad and right and wrong.

Now, listen, I did plenty of things while drinking that I really regret. I was not at my best self. I acted in ways sometimes that hurt others. I acted in ways sometimes that were harmful to myself. All of that is true. But it's also not why I was drinking. I wasn't drinking because I was bad. I was saying yes because of my Drink Archetypes.

I was going back for more because I didn't have the skills to manage impulsive and compulsive behaviors. Nor did I have the know-how to examine these behaviors after the fact and understand, hey, why did that actually happen? What was unfolding inside of me at the time so that I could see it and decide, this is what I need to do instead. This is how I need to show up differently in these moments. I didn't actually have a strategy other than, well, just don't be a screw-up.

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I want you to understand that there's a world of difference between, "I'm a bad person, that's why I'm drinking too much, that's why I do these stupid things when I'm drinking, it all flows from my very sinful nature," versus, "I'm a person who is both good sometimes and bad sometimes, who does things that have positive outcomes sometimes and things that have negative outcomes sometimes."

I am all of it. I am the contrast of good and bad, just like everyone else. And how much I drink is totally separate and unrelated from my character or my moral fiber. Even when I do things, when I'm drinking, that I later come to regret or things that hurt others or things that hurt myself, it still has nothing to do with my inherent goodness or badness as a person because that is irrelevant.

It has to do with a habit cycle operating outside my conscious awareness. And I can decide that I don't like certain behaviors and I want to change them, but I can do that from a place of self-inquiry and self-growth rather than a place of atoning for my deep depravity and needing divine intervention to put me on a righteous path.

So much is contained in that one thought I fucked up, and it is directly related to society's long history of labeling, quote, 'bad behaviors' as a spiritual affliction. Now, the other thing that I will say, I totally believe in taking accountability for our actions and behaviors that aren't serving us and maybe are hurting others, but I also believe in holding yourself accountable while maintaining your self-respect and your self-concern and self-compassion. You can hold yourself accountable without believing that you are morally corrupt.

Right, what happens instead, we are taught to hold ourselves accountable through shame and blame and seeing all that is broken and wrong with us. But trying to go about change by fundamentally trying to fix your depraved nature and fix yourself so that you can believe that you are good, it is just going to put you on a hamster wheel of always believing deep inside that something is wrong with you, that something is bad at your core, and

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constantly trying to chase after goodness rather than understanding these things are irrelevant to what is going on. Your goodness or badness, which by the way, we all have both of these things inside of us, it just has no bearing here.

So that's where that first thought comes from. That first thought, I fucked up, comes from the moral model of addiction. And then there's the thought, I'm fucked up, which sounds very similar, but it is indeed very different. And I believe that this thought I'm fucked up comes from the disease model of addiction.

I'm fucked up, or it often sounds like something must be wrong with me. This was often my next thought after waking up and yet again, having had way too much to drink. After I told myself that I messed up and I had to stop being so stupid, and I had to learn my lesson, I would kind of focus on that. And when it didn't work, I started to worry that maybe something inside of me must be fundamentally different from quote-unquote normal people. Maybe my brain wasn't like other people's. Maybe I was missing something on the inside that other people have. Maybe there was something about me that was abnormal. And I will tell you, that left me feeling very, very broken.

So here's the thing, why do so many of us believe that something is fundamentally wrong with us if we struggle with our drinking? Now, I would argue that this belief can be traced back to the disease model of addiction, which pathologizes the brain. It's viewing our behavior through the lens of, let me see if I can find what is abnormal about this brain to create this problem of drinking too much.

Now, this is very different from my approach, which is, hey, let's see how your brain is working exactly as it was designed, exactly as it's supposed to. Let's understand how your drinking is helping you, even if it has negative consequences that you don't like, to start from a place of seeing it as serving you, helping you, maybe in a misguided way, but from that starting point. That is very different than trying to understand your drinking as a sign of an internal abnormality.



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The disease model starts from the premise that you should be able to moderate a highly concentrated reward without any education or intervention. In other words, you should just naturally be able to do this. I really want you to back up and take this in and really hear me say that. The disease model starts from the premise that you should just be able to moderate a highly concentrated reward without education or intervention. And if you can't do this, then part of your body, namely your brain, must not be working properly, which I think is a very weird position to take.

Because think about it, why on earth should humans be able to moderate highly concentrated rewards without education or intervention? Why should this just come naturally to us? I really want you to think about that question. Why should we be able to drink with no problem? Because it's not how the reward center of the brain was designed to function.

The reward center of the brain is not about moderating, it's about remembering and repeating pleasurable experiences. Our brain is sensitive to things that create pleasure because those things helped our species survive. So things like eating and reproduction and social interactions, all of these things aren't pleasurable just because they're pleasurable because they are necessary for survival. Getting pleasure from these activities, it wasn't an accident. The pleasure that we get from these behaviors motivates us to repeat them. And that's the whole point of having a reward center. If the brain finds certain behaviors that are connected to survival pleasurable, then guess what? The brain, and therefore the species, will be more motivated to survive. So that's how the reward center is supposed to function, but then humans figured out a way to hijack the system.

We learned how to create highly concentrated rewards in large quantities that don't occur in nature with any sort of predictability. Now, sure, fermentation, it can happen and does happen without human intervention, but not in a way that you can reliably predict and not at scale. So yeah, you can get drunk if you eat a lot of over-ripened fruit on a tree. But if you want to do that right now, that's going to be kind of tricky because it got to

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happen upon the right kind of tree at the right time, with the right fruit, at the right stage of fermentation, with enough overripe fruit present, in other words, not yet found by other animals or other people to get you drunk. That is not an easy task.

So humans took this thing that, yes, does occur naturally in nature, fermentation, and they made it more predictable and scalable so that we could have highly concentrated rewards whenever we wanted them. We learned how to harness the power of fermentation and produce fermented beverages on a massive scale.

And we figured out how to create beverages with a much higher percentage of alcohol, essentially drinks that are way more intoxicating than overripened fruit on a tree. And then we also figured out how to make alcohol exceptionally cheap and easy to purchase. So humans really figured out how to game the system, not only by making rewards stronger, but by making them more plentiful.

So I want you to consider that the environment that we exist in now is not the environment in which your brain's reward center was designed to operate. The reward that you get from a grape really doesn't compare to the reward that you get from a glass of wine. And the reward that you get from a potato is really nothing compared to the reward your brain gets from vodka.

But the reward system in the brain is not sorting rewards into different groups. It's not saying, hmm, okay, well, the grape and potato I know are really important to survival, so I should remember those more, and I should want to repeat them more while the wine and vodka, yeah, that actually I know can create harm, so I should remember this less and repeat this less. No, that's not how the reward system works. It's just like rewards are good, full stop. And the bigger the reward, the better, the more that I should remember it and repeat it.



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So you have to understand all of this to understand that humans really hijack the system. And we did that, and then yet the message that society gives us when we're struggling to moderate is, hmm, something must be wrong or different about you. You are the problem. Your brain must be different. Your DNA must be suspect. Do you see how backwards this is? We introduced something that the brain was not designed to handle, and then we told people, hey, you're not normal if you can't handle it.

Now, again, I think that there are differences in the brain structure. I do believe that some people are more sensitive to dopamine than others, and that some brains are more or less responsive to rewards. So all of that can be true without needing to pathologize the brain.

We've totally ignored that the brain is not meant to operate in this kind of environment. We've created a world that is so saturated with rewards that it is hard to put down alcohol and hard to put down food and hard to put down your phone and hard to put down so many things. And then for years, we've made the inability to moderate a moral failing and then an abnormality in the brain. And now kind of a mixture of the two. Like you have a disease, it's not your fault, but also try to be a better person.

And what I want you to see is that these two thoughts, I fucked up and I'm a fuck up, all they do is create a ton of shame. Pathologizing and moralizing behaviors around alcohol is a recipe for feeling awful about yourself. And when you feel bad about yourself, you are actually less likely to create lasting change.

Now, people will say, oh, but Rachel, sometimes when I feel bad enough about how much I drink, then I finally do something about it. And I will just say, okay, well, how is that working out for you long-term? I went through that cycle myself, right? I would wake up and be like, ugh, never again, right? I'm swearing it off forever. And eventually I would find my way back there. Not because something was inherently wrong with my moral fiber, and not because there was something fundamentally abnormal about my

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brain, but because I wasn't actually addressing how the habit works. I wasn't actually addressing my drink archetypes.

What ends up happening for most people when you try to shame yourself into change, you end up flip-flopping back and forth all the time between being quote good by not drinking, and then you get to a point where you're sick of being good all the time and you tell yourself that you deserve to be a little bad and you're just on this rollercoaster.

This flip-flopping back and forth, it doesn't actually help you with your goals. It doesn't help you drink less during the week or less during a sitting or not at all. It just keeps you on this rollercoaster of shame.

And what I want to suggest is that it's time for you to stop the moralizing and pathologizing of impulsive and compulsive behaviors. You have been steeped in this for so long, and you have been doing this to yourself for so long without even realizing it. And it's only going to slow you down. It's only going to get in the way.

Acting quickly without a lot of conscious thought and without consideration of the consequences. In other words, acting impulsively, guess what? It's normal. Acting repetitively and feeling almost compelled to continue despite knowing the repercussions of continuing, in other words, acting compulsively, guess what? It's normal. Every human brain will at times fall prey to impulsive and compulsive behaviors. Now, not always with alcohol, but no human brain is immune to this.

The problem isn't you. The problem isn't your brain. The problem is that no one teaches us that not only are these behaviors normal, but that we need to learn how to actually manage them. We need to have skills and tools at the ready. We need to be able to bring the unconscious to our conscious awareness so that we can see what's going on and start to dismantle it and change it from the root cause. But the root cause is never that there's something wrong with you or something wrong with your brain.

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So the next time you wake up and you notice that you might be slipping into these two thoughts, ugh, I fucked up or I am fucked up, I want you to just stop and back up and remind yourself that all you are doing is repeating the message that we have given people for decade upon decade, that their drinking is a sign that something is fundamentally wrong with them, when all that will do is keep you stuck in this cycle of shame that's not actually gonna help you change 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.

So, head on over to [RachelHart.com](https://RachelHart.com) and sign up today, because changing the habit is so much easier when you stop trying to go it alone.