

# Ep #431: Why Time Away From Alcohol Can Backfire



## Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Rachel Hart**

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## Ep #431: Why Time Away From Alcohol Can Backfire

In today's episode, I'm unpacking one of the most common and frustrating experiences people face when they're trying to develop a healthier relationship with alcohol. And that's what happens if you decide to reintroduce alcohol after a period of abstinence. Suddenly, it can feel like all your progress has unraveled, like you've opened up the floodgates. I'm going to explain what's really going on, how to break out of this cycle, and why the metaphor of opening up the floodgates is part of the problem.

This is episode 431, and if you've ever told yourself, "I was doing so well, what happened?" Keep listening.

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.

We're talking today about something I was recently coaching on inside the membership, which is a really common pattern that a lot of people fall into around their drinking. So you stop drinking for a while, and maybe you get to a point where you start to question why you stopped. Or you wonder if you've finally learned your lesson and if you start drinking, you'll be more responsible. And so you decide to reintroduce alcohol.

Many people have the experience that drinking after a period of abstinence can feel like they have opened up the floodgates. So, maybe you immediately drink way too much, or maybe you actually kind of slowly bring it back in, but at some point, you look around and you realize that you're right back where you're started. You're drinking every day. And it feels like all of this hard work goes out the window.

You ended up falling back into the habit and maybe you feel like you're worse off. So many people, myself included for a very long time, will find themselves in this on-again, off-again relationship with alcohol. So you find that you love it, and you also kind of hate it. And you notice yourself flip-

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flopping back and forth between drinking and not drinking. And ultimately, this tug of war can really make you feel like you're not fully in control. It can feel as if when you are drinking, you're just at the mercy of this current that is pulling you downstream.

You know, when I was preparing for this episode, I looked up the definition of the word floodgates. And here's what I found: a last restraint holding back an outpouring of something powerful or substantial. And so, I think it makes a lot of sense why people use this word so often in relation to their drinking because it fits with how we tend to talk about alcohol. So, we culturally often talk about it as a substance that some people just can't handle, that has great power over them, right? They can't control themselves.

And I certainly felt this way for a very long time. I had a lot of evidence that I just didn't make good, responsible decisions when I was drinking, that I tended to never learn my lesson and tended to always have too much, always think more was better. And it was really frustrating because no matter how much I wanted to change, no matter how many good intentions I had, and no matter the consequences that I often suffered because of my drinking, I found myself drawn to going back to it. And whenever I would reintroduce it after a period of abstinence, it really did feel like all bets were off.

But I think that this idea that drinking somehow opens the floodgates is actually keeping you stuck more than it's helping you. So maybe it does create a little bit of fear inside of you, right? Like, oh, I shouldn't start again because I know what has happened in the past. And you know, so often we think that fear is really going to be the solution, right? So kind of logically, it's like, well, if I just resign myself to the fact that I can't control myself, then I'm not going to drink.

But that's not what happens for most people. That's not what happened for me, right? Most people stay stuck in this on-again, off-again relationship with alcohol and don't really understand why that is. We don't understand

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why we keep going back to something that part of us believes we can't really control and has power over us.

So I just want to acknowledge when you are asking yourself that question, why am I going to back to something when I feel like I'm not fully in control, when I am very aware of all of the downsides? I want to acknowledge that answering this question can be really tricky. To answer it honestly, without also shaming yourself. I shamed myself so much about it.

And it sounded like, you know, "Rachel, why do you keep making the same mistake? Why do you keep doing something that you know is going to end up with you waking up feeling miserable and regretful and embarrassed?" I told myself over and over again, "I should know better." I believe that after one too many drunken nights, I should have learned my lesson by now. And because of this, I deeply, deeply felt that my own relationship with alcohol was a very strong sign that something was wrong with me or wrong with my brain.

So, I just want to acknowledge all of this. The question of, why are you in this on-again, off-again relationship is not meant to shame you. It's meant for you to really start to get curious about what truly is the pull. This question is really meant to help you get to the heart of what is driving your behaviors around alcohol. Can you set aside your shame for a moment and approach the question from a place of curiosity?

Right? So just to say, I notice that I'm in this on-again, off-again relationship with alcohol. I wonder why. And I also notice that if after a period of not drinking I reintroduce alcohol, it really does feel like I'm opening the floodgates. It feels like I'm being pulled downstream against my will.

Can you get curious about why? Instead of falling into all of your knee-jerk answers that you've given yourself about how you should know better and maybe something's wrong with you and maybe something's different about your brain. Can you get curious about why you not only feel drawn to go back to it, but to want to not be constrained in any way, to want to have as

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much as you want to have? Because you really need that information first before you can figure out, how do I free myself from this current that is pulling me downstream?

This, of course, is where the drink archetypes come in. If you don't know your archetypes, you can go to [FindYourDrinkType.com](http://FindYourDrinkType.com) and take the free quiz because the archetypes help us understand that there's more to drinking than meets the eye. Your relationship with alcohol is built on more than just, well, I just really love the taste, or I love the way it makes me feel, or it's just what I've always done, or it's what everyone in my social group does. The archetypes help you get really specific about what your brain has learned from drinking.

And what I want you to consider is that part of why we end up in this on-again, off-again relationship, why we reintroduce alcohol and then end up feeling like we've opened the floodgates, it's not only connected to the archetypes, but it's deeply connected to how you approach periods of abstinence, how you approach your time away from drinking. And this is kind of wild, because I think we have such a kind of halo around the health benefits of not drinking that we fail to examine how our approach to abstinence, even small periods of abstinence, might be detrimental and part of why we feel so stuck.

Now, I will say, looking back, this was certainly true for me. Starting when I was 22, I took countless breaks from drinking. By the way, I started drinking when I was 17, so I had, you know, I had several years under my belt of drinking at that point. Sometimes I would take a break to prove that I could and prove that I didn't have a "problem." Sometimes I would go through a period of abstinence to punish myself for how I had behaved when I was drinking. I would often tell myself that I wasn't allowed to drink. And I would do this for sometimes, you know, a weekend or a couple weeks, or a month or many months.

But my entire mindset during these periods was always the same. It was really focused on just say no, just don't drink. And so I tried to avoid

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temptation and avoid my triggers and avoid certain people. And I just really would put my head down and try to power through. But I would always get to a point where I felt like, oh, God, I've been good for so long. I'm tired of being good. Or I would have a really stressful week at work, or I'd have a fight with my boyfriend, and I would say, oh, screw it. Or something unexpected would happen. Or sometimes that period of abstinence would just be premised on some arbitrary date in the future when I was "allowed" to drink again.

So I would get to that arbitrary date and be like, okay, I made it, I'm done, I get to drink. And for all of these reasons, I would decide to reintroduce alcohol. Sometimes it was a very impulsive decision. But even if it was based on some date in the future, the decision that I was making was never very well-considered. It was just like, well, screw it, or I made it to the end of the month, so now I'm allowed to drink. And so I would start back up.

And let me tell you, when I did this, when I approached abstinence this way, and I approached the reintroduction of alcohol this way, it did often feel like the floodgates just opened. Right? It didn't matter all the health benefits that I got from drinking. It didn't matter how much I loved waking up without regrets. I was just so happy in that moment to finally give myself permission to drink, permission to say yes to the thing that I really desired.

And guess what? After I gave myself that permission, it really did seem like my progress would just unravel. Again, sometimes it didn't happen immediately, but after a while, I would notice that I was right back in the same patterns. Sometimes I was even drinking more than before I started the break.

So, yeah, this really did feel like a very apt metaphor for me. It really did feel like I was opening the floodgates. I had a lot of evidence that this was what was going on. But what I want to suggest is that the reason that this happens, the reason it feels like the floodgates are just opening and then you're not really fully in control anymore, you're being swept down the river is because of how we are taught to approach our time away from alcohol.

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That just say no mentality, which is what we are all schooled to have, is really the actual problem here. You are not the problem. Your brain is not the problem. Alcohol is not the problem. The problem is that we aren't given real skills to manage our cravings and our triggers and our excuses and our desire that actually serve us in the long run. We are taught to use willpower and self-discipline and scare tactics. And eventually, those things wear out. Eventually, we get to a point where we're like, ugh, I'm sick of this, I'm sick of being good, or I had the bad day, or I just don't want to live my life like this.

Because we aren't actually taught how to look at the habit with curiosity. We're just simply labeling our behavior as bad and trying really hard to be good. When I was in the throes of my on-again, off-again relationship with alcohol, what I was missing time and time again was the deeper why behind why I was drinking. The deeper reason beyond, I just like the taste or I like how it makes me feel. I missed what alcohol was doing for me.

There were so many things back then that I deeply, deeply believed that alcohol was totally necessary for. So for me, I was very strongly associated with the Mask and the Release archetypes. So using alcohol to deal with social anxiety, but also using it to deal with the insanely high expectations that I put on myself and all the pressure that I felt like I was under.

Now, here's the problem. When I was abstaining, I wasn't doing the work on these archetypes. I was simply counting the days. I was trying to make up for being bad. I was simply counting the days or trying to make up for being bad. I was using willpower and avoidance to just mark another red X on the calendar. So yeah, I was saying no a lot during these periods, but I wasn't spending any time being curious with why I wanted to say yes.

And I was avoiding certain people and places and a lot of my triggers instead of learning how to handle these things other than by hiding out because the fact of the matter is there's only so long that we can hide out for. And I wasn't curious about what my brain had learned from drinking

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because I was so sure that my drinking was just bad and a sign that I was stupid and needed to be punished.

So I hadn't really understood how my brain had learned over time to use alcohol to cope with social anxiety and use it as a release from this intense pressure that I felt in my everyday life. And that was the real problem. And that is why it felt like when I would finally get to the end of a period of abstinence and reintroduce alcohol, why it really felt like the floodgates just reopened. Because I only knew how to say no under some very specific circumstances and conditions.

And that's why when I started drinking again, it really did feel like I opened the floodgates because I hadn't created any new neural pathways for myself. It was like the riverbed was dry for a while, but once the rain came, I hadn't built any diversions or dams or canals or changed the flow of the river in any way. I had just dried up all the rain. I hadn't actually changed the riverbed. That is the piece that is missing.

So the only way to really fix this situation is to reset your whole approach to periods of abstinence. And really your whole approach to understanding why it is you are drinking more than you want to. If you're in an on-again, off-again relationship with alcohol, you really need to ask yourself, well, why? Why am I in that on-again, off-again relationship? Notice how you want to first blame yourself and make you out to be the problem. But I guarantee if you get curious, you will start to see some of your archetypes appear. The ways in which drinking even too much is actually seen by part of your brain as helpful.

You have to really understand how you approach periods of abstinence. The first thing to get curious about is why am I stepping away from alcohol? Is it punishment for my bad behavior? Am I telling myself that I can't drink or I'm not allowed to drink? Am I trying to prove that I don't have a "problem"? Have I set some sort of arbitrary date for when I'm allowed to drink again in the future?

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So what I want you to do is really understand, am I approaching my time away purely through the lens of willpower and avoidance and just say no, rather than focusing on skill building? And I will tell you, if right now you feel like you're in the middle of a period where the floodgates have opened and now you're just struggling to keep your head above water, can you examine what's happening with curiosity instead of criticism?

Can you ask yourself, well, why don't I want to say no to this craving? Why don't I want to limit myself or stop? These can be really challenging questions to work with because so much of our knee-jerk response is, no, but I do want to say no, and I do want to stop, and I know how it's not good for me. But when we kind of go all the way over to the place of I should know better, we prevent ourselves from really getting curious and revealing these broader patterns in your life.

I will tell you, so often I work with people who when we start asking these questions will say, well, I say no to my desires and my needs all day long, and drinking is the one place that I allow myself to say yes. And if I have to limit myself here too, then I don't have any places where my needs and my desires come first. Now listen, that might not be true for you, but it's just worthwhile for you to have this deeper conversation about why you don't want to say no, why you don't want to limit yourself.

Can you notice your all or nothing thought patterns? Right? So that might show up in, well, I've already had one drink, so I might as well have one more. Or I blew my streak yesterday, so today doesn't matter. Breaking out of this pattern means switching to the mindset that it's not just about being perfect, it's about recognizing that no matter what happened last week or yesterday or even the moment before, the decision that you make now always matters. It's letting go of this belief that, you know, one bad apple spoils the bunch.

And ultimately, it's about reframing how you take responsibility for your drinking, shifting away from shame and blame or trying to scare yourself straight, which you guys have all tried and you've all seen how it doesn't

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work. And really moving into a place of recognizing that responsibility is a lot easier when you offer yourself self-compassion and self-respect, even in the moments and maybe especially in the moments when you wish that you had made a different decision.

Now, I will just add one word of caution here. Letting go of the floodgate story can be scary. Because it means letting go of the idea that how much you drink is out of your control, that alcohol makes you powerless, or that once you start, it's out of your hands, you can't stop. And as much as we don't like those stories, I certainly didn't like those stories, it felt really scary and overwhelming to let go of them.

But stepping into your power is always going to be scary because it means letting go of a way that you have been seeing the world. But I want you to consider is that the story of opening up the floodgates is not keeping you safe. It's keeping you stuck in an on-again, off-again relationship with alcohol for a reason, and not because you're powerless. Because the decision to reintroduce alcohol may feel impulsive, but it doesn't happen without your consent. And consenting is not a sign that there's something wrong with you, but it is a sign that your brain is holding on to a belief that certain things that it learned from drinking continue to be impossible without it.

Finally, I'll just offer this. Taking breaks truly can be incredibly powerful when done the right way, when you couple this work with the deeper work on your archetypes. That's why I teach a 30-day break in my membership that's very, very different from your kind of standard Dry January or Whole 30 where we're just saying no. It must be done differently than how you've previously approached it. A thoughtful break where you focus on learning can set you up for reintroducing alcohol in a sustainable way if that's something that you want to do. It can also just help you get out of the on-again, off-again relationship.

Rather than deciding that you're going to drink because you reached a certain day on a calendar or making an impulsive spur of the moment

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decision, you can learn how to make it a truly considered decision. And that's one of the things that I walk people through when they complete a 30-day challenge with me, getting to the end of it and really having an honest conversation with yourself about what comes next.

And so if it ever has felt like one drink just opened the floodgates, I want you to just be willing to question that story. Ask yourself, what was happening for me beforehand? What happened the next day? What did I make it mean? You'll start to see how your beliefs led you down the path of what happened next, because that's where your power always lies. One thought, one feeling, one decision at a time.

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.