

Ep #436: The Hidden Script Keeping You Stuck with Alcohol



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With Your Host

Rachel Hart

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Ep #436: The Hidden Script Keeping You Stuck with Alcohol

Ever wonder if it's really possible to just drink less or have an empowered, peaceful relationship with alcohol? Most people assume the answer is no. You're either a normal drinker and you can take it or leave it, or you're powerless and you have to quit forever. That's the story we've all been told. But what if that story isn't true?

This is episode 436, and I'm breaking down why society has conditioned us to believe in an all-or-nothing approach, why shame and fear don't actually create lasting change, and how a new playbook based on curiosity and skill building makes drinking less not only possible but sustainable.

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.

Today, I'm going to tackle a question that I hear people ask all the time. It is one of the most common questions that people ask me when they start doing this work. Is it really possible for me to just drink less, or do I have to stop drinking forever? I wondered about this myself for years and years because, for the longest time, it certainly felt impossible.

Now, the short answer to this question is yes, it is totally possible. But here's the thing. When I say that, what I have found is that it can really make a lot of people upset, even angry. I've certainly heard my fair share over the years on social media and in my inbox about how it's irresponsible of me to say that people can learn to change their drinking and drink less. But I will tell you, that strong reaction got me thinking.

Why is there so much disbelief when I say this? And why is there so much resistance to the idea that it could be possible to truly change your relationship with alcohol and learn how to drink less? The more I thought about it, the more I realized that this belief challenges a decades-old

[Take a Break from Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #436: The Hidden Script Keeping You Stuck with Alcohol

playbook that we've been given on how to create change, not just around alcohol but around any unwanted behavior in life. So let's dive in.

It all starts with this all-or-nothing story that we have around problematic drinking. From the time most of us are young, we're steeped in this all-or-nothing narrative when it comes to alcohol. So we accept it as true without really questioning it. And, you know, I certainly did.

The story goes like this: there are two types of people, normal drinkers who can take it or leave it, and alcohol is not a problem for them. And then there are alcoholics, people who are powerless to say no and must stop drinking forever. And if you don't fit neatly into the first category, then you're told you must belong in the second. And what that means is that there's no middle ground, no grey area, no possibility of struggling but figuring out how to overcome your struggle, no possibility of changing your relationship or changing your habits because, in this black-and-white narrative, it's not about change, it's about who you are. Someone who can drink or someone who can't.

Now, it's not just society at large that perpetuates this story. Long-standing treatment models reinforce it too. For almost 100 years, the most visible path to change has been abstinence-only based programs like AA. Programs like AA have cemented this belief that cutting back is not just impossible, it's dangerous. And if you dare question this approach, you're labeled as irresponsible. Or worse, you're told that you're in denial.

I can't tell you how long, how many years I spent worrying about whether or not I was an alcoholic. Did I have to stop drinking forever? I kept trying to figure out whether or not this label applied to me, rather than stepping back and understanding why I was struggling and why my drinking looked the way that it did. And that's what happens when you present this all-or-nothing story. You get rid of any nuance and curiosity. People will spend a lot of time trying to figure out, am I this or am I that? And I would argue that

Ep #436: The Hidden Script Keeping You Stuck with Alcohol

this energy of trying to figure out which bucket you fit into, that energy is misdirected.

It would be a lot better spent trying to understand your current relationship to alcohol, your current patterns and habits around drinking, and why your drinking looks the way it does, in addition to why the idea of never drinking again feels so charged for you. This is a question that I often have people explore, not because I'm trying to promote abstinence, but because when you explore that question, why does it feel so untenable or so charged, the idea that you would have to stop drinking for the rest of your life? What happens is that people can very quickly see the ways in which they have come to use alcohol and what they imagine would feel more difficult or harder or even impossible without it. This question is often a really perfect jumping-off place to explore your drink archetypes.

So, you've got this all-or-nothing story, you've got the treatment models that push abstinence-only as the only solution, and then you've got this thousand-year-old script of focusing on fear and shame. This script is really what sits underneath all of it. We have been conditioned to believe that fear and shame are the ultimate motivators for change.

Think about the script that you've been handed about how people should change any unwanted behavior, whether it's drinking, overeating, drug use, overspending, gambling, cheating. The script goes like this: First, label the behavior as sinful or immoral. It's not just a mistake. It's not just something you regret. It's bad. It's evil. It's a defect of character, and it reflects poorly on you.

Then, drive home the guilt and shame. You are supposed to feel awful about this behavior because the heavier the guilt, the more serious your desire to change will be, or at least that's what we're told. Next, insist there's only one solution. There's only one right path. You're told time and time again there's only one acceptable path forward, and straying from it is dangerous.

[Take a Break from Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #436: The Hidden Script Keeping You Stuck with Alcohol

For example, maybe you've heard, well, if you want to change, you have to quit drinking forever. Anything less is just being in denial. Moderation never works. Either you're in or you're out. If you can't follow the program exactly as written, you're not serious about getting better. Cutting back is just playing with fire. The only safe option is total abstinence. If you slip up even once, it means you have to start all over from day one. All of these messages reinforce that there is only one path forward and only one right way.

So you've got labeling the behavior as sinful or immoral, driving home the guilt and shame, insisting that there's only one solution, and then enforcing strict rules. Obey the rules and you're good. Break them and you failed. And then finally, backsliding equals weakness. If you slip up, it's proof that you need to try harder.

This is what I call the hate yourself into being a better person paradigm. And listen, I tried it. Not just with my drinking, with smoking, with overeating, with overspending, with relationships. I told myself again and again that my behaviors were bad and that I should feel bad about them, that I needed to feel shame in order to change. I tried to enforce really strict rules with myself, and anytime that didn't work, I told myself that I just wasn't trying hard enough and I must not really care. And you know the result? I felt totally broken in so many areas of my life for so long, not just around drinking. And this is why so many people are stuck.

Now, here's the problem. This playbook, this script that we've been given, it can create short-term compliance. Fear and shame can sometimes get us to follow rules for a little while. But compliance is not the same thing as transformation. What this old script doesn't do is help you actually understand why the behavior is happening in the first place, why you're having a craving, how to respond to it, why it's hard to say no. It's not helping you understand how your brain learned to expect to drink at a certain time of day or in certain situations or in response to certain feelings.

Ep #436: The Hidden Script Keeping You Stuck with Alcohol

It's not helping you understand how saying yes, even when that can have negative consequences for you, may be a form of coping with discomfort or a stand-in for a deeper desire. And it's not helping you understand or see the upside of how drinking, and frankly, all of your behaviors, may be an attempt to try to actually help yourself.

And there's another problem. There's almost no acknowledgment of how much fear the word forever provokes when it comes to abstinence. For most people, even just imagining never having another drink again can feel really overwhelming. It can feel like you're staring down a cliff. Instead of motivating change, the idea of permanent abstinence often sends people running in the opposite direction.

That's what happened for me because think about it, if forever is the only option, so many people are immediately going to write that off as impossible. I can't do that. So I guess there's no point in even trying. And that really is tragic because it pushes people further away from help and support. They don't reach out. They don't experiment with tools that could help them drink less. They don't start learning about their urges or their habits because they've already decided, well, if there's only one path and it's not something I want to do or it's not something that I actually believe I can do, or if it's something that I've tried before and it's never worked, then I can't do anything.

And this is one of the biggest reasons I challenge the all-or-nothing narrative, because by insisting on total abstinence as the only acceptable path, we end up shutting people out who are desperate for a different relationship with alcohol but terrified of being told that they have to give it up completely. Because this is exactly what happened to me. An insistence on abstinence only kept me further away from seeking out support and help.

And it's not that I think that the decision to abstain is bad. I have had tremendous insight from going long periods in my own life without alcohol,

Ep #436: The Hidden Script Keeping You Stuck with Alcohol

but it also happened under very different conditions. I wasn't telling myself that I had to stop drinking forever. I wasn't telling myself that it was the only path for change.

One of the things that I did instead was tell myself, you don't have to stop drinking forever, but I do want you to set aside some time to figure out why you feel like you need it in certain situations and also develop the skills how not to need it, to not need it after a stressful week at work, to not need it to feel like I could belong and I was part of the crowd, to not turn to it after a fight with my boyfriend or a fight with my family, to not race to the bar when I felt awkward socializing. I knew that having a different relationship with alcohol, a healthier relationship, required learning these skills. And I also believed that having time away from drinking would help me work on this and get to the root of what was going on more quickly.

Because there was a part of me that understood the more I told myself that having a drink was an easy fix or a solution or the way to reliably change how I felt, the more of a problem it became. Otherwise, when compliance doesn't work, then what happens? You repeat the same exhausting cycle over and over again. And that was me for the longest time, and it's what I see with so many people. You're staying stuck, you're spinning your wheels, not because you're doing something wrong, but because you're unknowingly following this old script, this old playbook, which frankly doesn't work.

This is why I eventually had to write a new playbook for myself, a different script, a different way of approaching my drinking. And here's what that looks like. First, is seeing the behavior as information. Drinking isn't a moral failing. Drinking too much is not a sign that something is wrong with you. It's a clue about what your brain has learned to expect. It's also insight into the drink archetypes that are activated unconsciously beneath the surface.

Next, use curiosity instead of shame. The goal isn't to feel terrible. The goal is really to understand what's happening and why. In fact, the worse that

[Take a Break from Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #436: The Hidden Script Keeping You Stuck with Alcohol

you feel, the more that you will often just want to throw your hands up and say, "Well, if I feel this bad or I'm this broken, I might as well have a drink." I sure did that all the time.

I also think it's important to empower multiple solutions. There isn't one right path forward for everyone because there's no one right way forward for anything in life. Your job is to discover something that works for you.

Build skills, not rules. Success does not come from compliance. This was a huge mindset shift for me because I really for so long told myself that I just needed to be more disciplined. But what I have learned over time is that success comes from developing tools that you can use and apply in a lot of different situations, tools when you have cravings or excuses or you feel overwhelmed, or you're just certain that nothing is going to help right now but a drink.

And finally, the ability to view your missteps not as failure, but as data. If you drink more than you planned, it's not proof of weakness. It's an opportunity to learn and then take that information so that you can adjust. This shift from shame to curiosity, from rules to skills, is what makes drinking less possible. It's what makes changing your relationship with alcohol possible.

And I want you to hear this. When you step into this new script, when you step out of the all-or-nothing trap, you create space for yourself to finally trust that change truly is possible, even if all your past attempts have failed. Because all those past attempts, they weren't proof that you couldn't change. They were just proof that the old paradigm doesn't work.

So if you've ever wondered if you can change, the answer is yes, it's absolutely possible. But it starts with questioning the old script you were handed and being willing to try out a new one. And I will just add, this is one place where I see people get hung up because many people very quickly are able to identify that they don't like the guilt and the shame and the

Ep #436: The Hidden Script Keeping You Stuck with Alcohol

scare tactics, and they want to have an empowered way forward, but they often are very uncomfortable being curious. They don't necessarily want to explore, they just want a different set of rules to follow.

So it truly is a radical shift to leave that behind, to leave compliance behind and replace it with curiosity. And just like every skill, I really believe that curiosity is a muscle that you can develop. It's not just something that you're born with, it's something that you can grow and cultivate with practice.

All right. What I want to suggest for you today is to sit with the idea that change doesn't require fear or shame. And what that would look like for you if you weren't always trying to scare or guilt yourself or force discipline as the way forward. It would likely be radically different to focus on curiosity, compassion, and learning new skills. And remember, if hating yourself into being a better person worked, it probably would have worked by now. I have never encountered anyone whose problem was that they were being too kind or too nice to themselves about their drinking.

And if you want to dive deeper into this work, I really encourage you to take the drink archetypes quiz. It's totally free. You can take it at FindYourDrinkType.com. When you get your results, it will help you understand your primary and secondary archetypes. And learning about your archetypes is one of the most important and powerful things you can do to flip the script on the old playbook and start understanding your drinking, your habits, your behaviors, and your relationship with alcohol in a new way.

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?

Ep #436: The Hidden Script Keeping You Stuck with Alcohol

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.