Ep #453: Afraid You'll Lose Friends If You Stop Drinking? Listen to This. [Listener Q&A]

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With Your Host

Rachel Hart

Take a Break from Drinking with Rachel Hart

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If you've ever worried that not drinking will make you boring, if you've ever wondered whether your friendships can survive without alcohol, or if part of you thinks, maybe I should just have one drink to keep things normal, this episode is for you. This is episode 453 and we're talking about why that fear runs so deep, what alcohol is really doing for you socially, and what actually helps you feel at ease around others.

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.

All right, today we have a listener question from Sean and here's what he writes: "One of my biggest fears is that all my friends will think I'm boring now that I don't drink, or they will feel uncomfortable. How do you keep very close friends and not come across as boring? How do you not make it uncomfortable for them to hang out with you if you don't join in? Don't get me wrong, I used to be the one that got the drunkest, so maybe it will be a relief for them. I don't know. I just have these feelings of losing friendships if I don't join in, and I don't seem to have an off switch with alcohol. Is it possible to just have one drink?"

Well, okay, first Sean, I can so relate. Worrying about my friendships and how they were going to function if I wasn't drinking, it kept me stuck for a long, long time. Because the mask archetype and the connector archetype were so strong for me. Early on, I learned that drinking was a way to deal with my social anxiety and create connection with people. So, I really get where you're coming from with this question.

What I want you to see, however, is that your question is really less about friendship and more about how to deal with your own inner critic. When I read what you wrote, what I hear is, if I'm not drinking, I'm boring. If I'm not drinking, I might not be someone people would want to be around. If I'm not

drinking, I might make other people uncomfortable. And if I'm not drinking, maybe there's no reason for people to stay friends with me.

So along the way, your brain started to believe that your regular self was not enough. You started to think as many people do, I have this thought as well, I'm just better when I'm drinking. And that belief might feel really, really true. You might have a lot of evidence to support it. But I want you to pause for a second and take in that it's also incredibly cruel. The idea that you're not fun, you're not likable, you're not worth being around if you're not drinking is a really mean thing to think about yourself.

And before I go any further, because I can already see a lot of you guys out there listening thinking, "Okay, Rachel, but you don't understand. You don't understand how much my friends like to drink or how it's a part of everything that we do socially or how I've watched friends of mine roll their eyes or make jokes about people who don't drink." What I want you to know is that all of this can be true, and that doesn't change how incredibly mean it is to tell yourself, "I'm just better with a drink."

Now yes, your friendships may change, but they may also stay more the same than you actually realize right now. Now, I don't know your friends, Sean, but I do know having worked with so many people that when you remove alcohol from the equation, it actually helps give you some really valuable clarity on your relationships with other people. Going through this process will help you discover the people who you want to remain close to and where you have bonds with people that actually transcend alcohol. It also helps you see the friendships where when you remove drinking from the equation, there's not that much there.

But notice right now how your question is all about whether other people will want to be friends with you and ignoring whether or not you will want to maintain your friendship with them. Again, I'm not saying that you shouldn't, right? Or that you won't want to. I'm just pointing out that in the framework

of your question, you're totally focused on how they will assess you rather than the other way around.

Because the core problem that you're facing right now is recognizing and realizing the job that alcohol did for you. And from what you wrote, I'm guessing that a big part of that job was helping you deal with your inner critic. Alcohol doesn't add personality; it subtracts inhibitions. And subtracting your inhibitions helps you feel less self-conscious. Right? It turns down the volume on your inner critic.

So the real skill you need is not how do I learn to have just one drink, but how do I access the ease and connection that I want to feel without needing a chemical mute button, which is essentially the skill of learning how to talk back to your inner critic. How to stop relating to that part of you that wants to point out all of your flaws and everything that you're doing wrong and the ways that you're different and not measuring up, to stop relating to it as if it's just a truth teller and instead see it as an unchecked habit of viewing yourself in a negative light or scanning for ways in which you somehow are different or don't fit in.

And just to be really clear here, you weren't born with an inner critic. I think that's always a really important starting point. None of us are. It is a learned behavior. And we learn to judge ourselves and judge ourselves negatively for a really good reason. It isn't your brain's job to make you happy or confident. Your brain's job is to keep you safe. And for humans, safety has always been very tied to belonging. Being rejected from a group, from a tribe, it used to be very dangerous in terms of our survival. So, the brain learned to scan all the time. Am I okay? Did I do something wrong? Did I say something wrong? Am I still being accepted?

For some people, myself included, that system of constantly scanning to see what you might be doing wrong, it gets turned way up, often because earlier in life, maybe approval felt conditional. Maybe you learned that being liked meant performing or achieving or not messing up. Or maybe the

adults around you had very amped up inner critics of their own and so you unconsciously learned, "Oh, that's the correct way to be in the world, to always be judging yourself." Or maybe you're just naturally very perceptive and attuned to other people, which means you read rooms well and you notice subtle social cues. But the downside is, your brain never really shuts off its self-monitoring.

And that's where alcohol often comes in. Again, alcohol doesn't give you confidence or personality; it temporarily quiets the inner critic. So it turns down the volume on the constant internal surveillance of yourself. So when someone says, "Well, I'm just more fun with a drink," what they often mean is, "I'm less afraid of being judged or I'm less judgmental of myself."

The problem, of course, is that your brain learns that alcohol is how you escape an overactive inner critic. And I think this is where things get really fascinating because instead of drinking helping you cope with social anxiety, what you start to see is that drinking can actually make your social anxiety worse. Over time, the moments when you're not drinking can feel more uncomfortable by comparison, which strengthens the belief, "I need a drink to relax around these people or to feel like myself or to be the best version of myself."

But guess what? When you train your brain to believe I need a drink to relax or have fun in these situations, then every situation without alcohol is going to feel harder. Not drinking is going to make you more anxious.

All of this is to say that the work is not to somehow delete your inner critic, right? We all have one. I still have one. It's learning how to relate to it differently. So you're no longer dependent on needing alcohol in order to quiet it because you know how to quiet it yourself. This is such an important skill that all of us need and pretty much nobody teaches us how to do.

The deeper work here is the work of really liking yourself, right? Because the underlying question is, can I like myself when I'm not drinking? And if

you say, well, if I'm not drinking, I'm boring, then it's hard to do that. And I will just tell you, I really felt this way too. And it really helped me to learn to see that the moments when I felt like I was being boring or I was worried that people were going to perceive me as boring, I was actually in a fear state, right? When I was constantly scanning the room for how I didn't belong or what I was doing wrong or how I didn't fit in, I was in a state of fear. And when that happened, I would get really quiet. I would retreat to the edges of the group. I would try to make myself small and not be noticed. Not because I was boring, but because my inner critic was so ramped up that I was feeling afraid.

And when you do this work to change your relationship with alcohol, especially for all of you guys out there with the Connector and the Mask archetypes, when alcohol really feels integral to how you relate to others, there's going to be a transition period. Things are going to feel a little awkward or a little wobbly with your friends and your family at first. That's really normal. You've got to reframe that period from, "Oh my God," right, "this is a social death sentence," and understand that it's you learning how to show up differently and also discovering what your friendships are actually built on.

And yes, you might discover that with some people, maybe there isn't that much there once you remove alcohol. I discovered that with some people. There were people in my life that if we weren't getting drunk together, we didn't have that much in common. But with the vast majority of my friendships, I realized actually we have a pretty solid foundation without it.

So it's also really important to zoom out and realize that no matter what, friends are always going to come in and out of your life. There will always be friendships that fade away or grow with you, friendships that are going to evolve and change over time and that's just how relationships work.

Now, you ended your question by saying, "I don't seem to have an off switch with alcohol. Is it possible to just have one drink?" And I want you to

really see what's behind that question. It's not really about, am I able to learn how to limit how much I drink? It's really asking, "Can I hang on to this strategy?" Right? It's the idea that if I just keep the drink in my hand, then I don't have to risk being fully seen. I don't have to feel awkward or uncomfortable. I don't have to worry that I don't belong or they won't like me. That question, "Can I just have one drink?" it's really an attempt to solve an inner critic problem without actually doing the work to learn how to relate differently to your inner critic.

And this is why doing the work on your archetypes is so important. I always tell people that if you treat your drinking purely like a numbers game, focusing on, "Okay, I just need to learn how not to drink too much or how to not go past this number," what you're going to always miss is that your brain learned that alcohol performed an important job. And until you learn how to perform that job without it, you're always going to struggle with your cravings because your brain is like, "Listen, we don't need to do this job, we can just have the drink." And that's going to make cravings very difficult to say no to.

So Sean, here's what I want you to practice. One, doing the work of not automatically believing all of the opinions that come from your inner critic. Sometimes you just have to label it. It's like, "Oh right, this is my inner critic talking. This isn't the truth." You have to go searching for evidence of what you bring to the table just as you. You have to start challenging the thought, "I'm only fun to be around if I'm drinking," or, "People only like me if I drink."

You also have to practice relating differently to the anxiety that you might be feeling when you're around people that very likely you are used to trying to drink over. Now, I will tell you this, I still feel anxious in social situations sometimes. I haven't erased anxiety from my life. I've just learned how to not let it run the show, how not to be anxious or afraid of my own anxiety. So one of the things I do, it's an exercise in my book, The Ultimate Guide to Drinking Less, I consider the possibility when I'm feeling this way, when I'm

feeling a little uncomfortable or awkward or anxious in a social situation, I consider the possibility that I'm not alone, that when you're feeling a little awkward or out of place, that somebody else in the room is also in the same boat.

Because what I have learned is that anxiety, social anxiety in particular, it puts blinders on you. It makes you feel as if you are the only person in that room who feels out of place. But when you pause for a moment and you consider that maybe that's not true, in fact, it's most likely not true at all, it just helps you take the spotlight off of yourself. Now, that doesn't magically make your anxiety disappear, but it gives you a little more breathing room so you can relate to it differently rather than, "Oh my God, I just need to have a drink and then I'm going to feel better."

I think the other thing to practice is to give yourself some grace while you're finding your footing with your friends. We have this tendency to default to, "Okay, if it feels awkward, then I'm just going to not go at all." Don't turn into a hermit. I did this for a while. It's not particularly helpful, right? Because ultimately, all of us crave connection. So let it be a little weird at first, not because you're weird, but because you're creating a new neural pathway. It's like a workout at the gym. If you went to the gym and you didn't break a sweat, if it wasn't hard to lift weights, you wouldn't be getting any stronger. The same is true here.

Notice when you're fixated on worrying if other people are going to feel weird about your choices. Now listen, maybe they will. I don't know your friends, but let's see if you can reframe what's going on. Maybe people act a little strange not because you're doing something wrong, but just because we have so many unconscious social scripts around alcohol. There really is this unspoken idea that if someone isn't drinking, the whole group has to adjust or that drinking around someone who is not drinking is somehow rude or risky, especially if that person has struggled with how much they drink.

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And I just want you to hear this. That awkwardness from other people, it doesn't automatically mean that you're the awkward one. It often means that you're just interrupting a pattern or a social script that many people don't even realize is there. So instead of making it about you, right? Instead of just defaulting to like, "I'm boring," or, "I'm the buzzkill," or, "I'm making other people uncomfortable," try flipping it into curiosity, asking yourself, "I wonder what story we all carry around what it means when someone doesn't drink," or, "Why does it feel like everyone has to match? Why does that feel really important?" Or, "What are people worried will happen if someone just doesn't join in?"

A lot of us have been unconsciously led to believe that cravings are dangerous and that if you struggle with drinking too much, being around alcohol is a risk and that the safest thing to do is just avoid it completely. That is a very common cultural message, but it can also make people's decisions not to drink feel like this big deal or this, you know, fragile situation when it doesn't have to be.

And sometimes when you don't drink, it invites other people to notice their own relationship with alcohol, not in a dramatic way, but just in this human way, and that can feel a little vulnerable for them. So again, if someone seems a little weird about your choices, you don't have to assume that you're the problem. You can see that there's a lot going on that has nothing to do with you and just let other people have their feelings without making it your job to fix them.

So Sean, here's what I want to leave you with. Your job right now is not to prove that you're still fun or likable or worthy of friendship without alcohol. Your job is to get curious and start questioning the thoughts that say that you aren't. Your job is to practice staying with yourself when your inner critic gets really loud and calling out your inner critic for what it really is, a learned behavior, and also letting your relationships meet the real you where you are. Some friendships may shift. Some may surprise you by

deepening. Some might fall away and that's normal. All of those changes in your friendships are going to happen regardless. And the more you stop trying to manage other people's comfort, the more room you create for genuine connection, connection that doesn't require you to perform some version of yourself that you think is more acceptable.

So when the question, can I just have one drink, comes up, when you think that would solve everything, I want you to pause and ask a different question. What am I afraid would happen if I don't? What job have I outsourced to drinking? Because learning how to be with your inner critic, with awkwardness, with anxiety, with self-doubt, that is your real work. And knowing how to do this without drinking over it, that is what creates real freedom. And one last thing, you're not boring when you're not drinking. You're just learning how to be with yourself without armor. And I think that anyone who is willing to do that is someone who is worth getting to know.

All right, if you want to learn more about the drink archetypes, check out the free quiz at FindYourDrinkType.com. And again, if you have any questions you'd like to hear me answer on the podcast, you can send them to RachelHart.com/podq, that's p-o-d-q. All right everybody, 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 and sign up today, because changing the habit is so much easier when you stop trying to go it alone.