Ep #473: Ooh, free drinks! [Thought Swap]

Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Rachel Hart

Ep #473: Ooh, free drinks! [Thought Swap]

Okay, you know that little jolt of excitement you get from an open bar or a complimentary glass of champagne? Free drinks, actually, free stuff in general, used to feel really hard for me to say no to and really easy for me to go overboard on. This is episode 473, and I'm giving you three thought swaps to help if you also have a hard time resisting a drink when it's free. I'll explain what's really going on in your brain when it gets excited about not having to pay and how to deal with temptation in these moments so it doesn't feel like you're missing out on a good deal.

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 today we are doing another thought swap episode, and we're tackling that moment when you're offered a free drink. The moment when your brain lights up at the thought of not having to pay, and you think to yourself, it would be so silly to pass it up. Who says no to a free drink? This can happen when you're at a wedding with an open bar or when you're offered a free drink on a flight. It can happen at fundraisers and galas and art openings and work events and sometimes even when you're shopping.

And the logic in the moment feels so airtight. Why would I pass up on something that's free? It's like you're leaving money on the table. And I want to be really clear. There is nothing virtuous about denying yourself pleasure. That is not what my work is about. It's okay to want a treat sometimes. It's okay for that treat to be a drink. And it's okay for you to feel excited about a free drink.

This is not about turning down free things to prove a point or to show how disciplined you are. It's just about getting curious about the patterns that are keeping you stuck in a loop with your drinking. When you find yourself maybe saying yes and yes to another in part because the drink is free. When part of you then wishes that you hadn't. So this is really about

understanding the moments where saying no feels strangely difficult and how, when you tell yourself, "Oh, but the drink is free," it can almost feel like the decision has already been made and there's no way to argue with that logic.

Here's what I think is so interesting about this topic. Humans can feel a real pull towards free stuff. We love the idea of getting something for nothing. And it makes a lot of sense because human survival was fundamentally shaped by the scarcity of resources. So our brain was shaped by this tension between unlimited needs and limited resources. Our ancestors lived in environments where there was often scarcity around food, water, shelter, warmth, and also pleasure.

And so if you came across an abundance of something, maybe a huge yield of berries, or you successfully hunted large game, or just access to extra resources, this wasn't something to sit down and analyze and think, "Huh, do I really need all of this?" This was something that your survival brain told you was an opportunity to seize and that letting things go to waste could impact your survival. Your brain wasn't stopping in these moments to consider, "Well, do I really need this cache of free resources?" It was operating on the basis that resources were always limited and you couldn't afford to pass them up ever.

So when something is free, it almost acts like a shortcut in the brain where we assume there's only upside. No trade-off, no cost, no downside, because we didn't have to expend any energy or resource in order to obtain the free thing. Now, even as you understand all of that, it's important to notice that you probably don't treat all free things equally. For example, I generally hate free swag that you get at conferences. So I don't want the tote bag or the branded water bottle or the free samples that someone is handing out because to me, that's just going to be clutter in my house. But we have a little free library in our neighborhood that I love going to. I love going to with my kids, seeing if there are books that we want.

Ep #473: Ooh, free drinks! [Thought Swap]

So yes, we have this very old wiring that is connected to our survival brain around free things. But in our modern world, it's clearly not that freeness itself is the only thing that's grabbing our attention. Yes, again, it's triggering part of the survival brain that we may never stop to actually question. But on top of that, we have all these thoughts about why we do or don't want certain free things. So I want you to keep that in mind as I'm going through these thought swaps.

So this really brings me to the trap with free drinks. Again, they can feel like they are all upside, like saying no would just be dumb or like you're not getting your money's worth, even if there's no money involved. It might even feel wasteful for you. Saying yes to free alcohol, it feels almost like it can recruit positive qualities. Like you're able to tell yourself, "Well, it's a good deal," or "I'm maximizing my experience. I'm not missing out." And this is what makes the thought, "Ooh, a free drink," so sticky. Not having the free drink can feel like you're the chump who left value on the table.

So this is our starting point. What I want to help you do from here is just to start to poke holes in your brain's logic in all of those moments when you think, "Ooh, free drink," or you tell yourself, "Well, but it's free. Why would I pass it up?" Maybe it happens at a wedding or work events or maybe every time you fly. All we want to do here is just give your brain another framework for thinking about the drink in front of you without going straight to, "I just need to say no," or trying to convince yourself that it's bad to drink or that alcohol is poison, or even trying to virtue signal, that you're so disciplined or you're so healthy or shaming yourself for having the desire in the first place. I just want these thought swaps to help create a little moment of pause to understand, okay, what is actually going on in that moment when it feels really difficult to resist the temptation of a free drink? And can we interrupt that current default of just saying yes?

Now, I will add that the struggle of saying no to a free drink, it shows up with a lot of archetypes, but I see it show up in particular with the Upgrade and the Reward archetypes. I'm not going to go deep into the archetypes in

this episode. If you want to learn more, you can take the quiz at FindYourDrinkType.com. You can read about the archetypes on my website, RachelHart.com. But just know this, when your brain associates drinking with a way to make the experience better or as a treat, it makes sense why the pull of a free drink can feel even stronger in these moments because they're really tapping into the archetype itself.

Okay, so here are the three swaps for, "Ooh, a free drink." And remember, you just have to find one entry point. Not all three of these swaps have to work perfectly for you. And if you feel like one of them sort of works but not quite, play with it. Change it, change the wording, edit it, make it your own. Make it work for you.

Okay, swap number one. When the drink is free, my brain is only doing half the math. Here's the thing about the word "free." It signals to the brain that there's no cost. But free of charge and free of cost are not the same thing. They are really not. Free of charge just means no money is changing hands, but it says nothing about what happens next.

And I want to be really careful here because I don't think the cost of alcohol is simply unwanted calories or if you drink too much, then you might regret what you did or said. Or I don't think it's about the hangover or how you might feel the next day. I want to put that aside for a second and think more about the cost of being out of alignment with the part of you that wants to change your relationship with alcohol. The part of you that doesn't always want to say yes when you have the urge or the craving.

Because here's the thing, if you're listening to this podcast, there is some part of you that wants to change. Now, you may feel conflicted about it. I certainly did for a very long time. You may not be sure where you want to end up. But if you're here, there is a part of you, and I like to think of it as your intuition, that knows something about your current drinking, something about your current relationship with alcohol, it doesn't feel good for you. There is a part of you that wants to change. And the cost of not listening to

your intuition is real, not just when it comes to drinking, when it comes to everything in our lives.

So there is a cost to the free drink. And your brain, in that moment, it's only doing half of the math. It's not accounting for what it might feel like later to have made a decision that not only feels out of alignment, but that actually reinforces, "Oh, when I have that desire, when I feel the pull, I always say yes to it." So maybe the first drink feels out of alignment, or maybe the first drink feels fine, maybe it's the fourth drink that feels out of alignment. It's really going to be individual for each person. But I just want you to remember that there is a cost that isn't necessarily associated with how you're going to feel the next day. A large part of the cost is really what your brain is learning and the archetypes that get really reinforced.

And I will just say that we know that this is true in so many parts of our lives where our brain is really only doing half the math. So the free sample of food isn't really free if you're trying to lose weight and you didn't want those calories. The free thing that you grab and bring home isn't really free if you're stressed out by all the clutter in your house. Free things can often pull us off track from the bigger goals that we have and who we want to be. So just remember that my brain is doing half of the math here. There is a cost and it's just not always something that your brain is thinking about in the moment.

It's kind of like when the only meter your brain is running is the money meter and you think, "Well, the drink is free," it gets translated in that moment to, "It costs nothing. There's no downside." But that is only half of the equation.

The clearest place that I often see this is at a wedding where there's an open bar. Now, I will tell you this, I definitely used to approach an open bar at a wedding as like payment for my attendance. And I understand kind of how cynical that sounds, but I remember heading to weddings and thinking, yeah, there better be an open bar. The idea that I would have to pay for alcohol was kind of annoying to me because I was starting from this place

of, "I've already spent all this money in order to be here, so the drinks better be free." And so I was only ever doing half the math at the open bar. I wasn't thinking about the cost to me, in part because I felt like I had already incurred such a large cost simply by showing up. So your brain is running an equation. It's just thinking about cost purely in terms of money.

Again, this swap isn't about telling yourself that free things are bad and that you should always say no to them. It's just reminding yourself that your brain is only doing half the math in these moments. When you hear yourself think, "Ooh, it's free," you can pause and remind yourself, okay, free of charge, sure, but does that mean free of cost? And by the way, what is the cost exactly? Sometimes it was really helpful for me not to think squarely in terms of health, but really understanding how in this moment, saying yes to my desire, saying yes to the craving or the urge was reinforcing a way that I didn't want to be. Kind of a way that I didn't want to show up in the world. So sometimes just noticing, hey, yeah, there is a second half to this equation that my brain's not running, it's not paying attention to, that can be enough to create a little space and make a different choice.

All right, swap number two. Now, this is a question that you can pose to yourself in the moment when you're thinking like, "Ooh, free drinks." You can ask yourself, I wonder what's in it for them. Now, this one, it took me a while to see, but once I saw it, it was like I couldn't unsee it. In a lot of situations, a free drink isn't a gift to you in the way that it feels like it is. It's actually doing a job for the person offering it. Now, offering people things for free is not bad or deceptive. I offer things for free. This podcast is free. I have a free quiz. I teach free classes. So it's not inherently wrong to offer things for free. But I do think it is always worthwhile to get curious about why people are offering something for free, especially when alcohol is involved.

Because alcohol lowers your inhibitions. It can make you a little looser. It can soften your judgment. It's easier to get swept up in the moment because you're less likely to be weighing your choices carefully. And that is

worth paying attention to. So, for example, if you're at a gala or a fundraiser with an auction, the whole point of that event is to get you to open your wallet. And so free drinks lowers your resistance to raising the paddle or spending money. Restaurants know that the more people drink, the more food they order. I've been offered drinks while shopping for clothing. When we drink more, we are more likely to spend more.

Now, listen, I've also had businesses offer me free drinks to make up for a mistake. So shortly before I got married, my husband and I went to the jeweler. We were so excited to pick up our wedding rings that we had gotten specially engraved. And when we picked them up, we noticed that they had gotten the engravings wrong, and there just wasn't time to redo it before the wedding. And the manager quickly offered us a free glass of champagne. Now, I've also had this happen at hotels when there has been problems with my reservation or a really long wait. They aren't trying to get me to spend more money, but they are trying to do something to change maybe the emotional atmosphere in that moment when the customer is not so happy. It's not compensation for a mistake, it's an attempt to divert your attention away from how you're upset and what went wrong.

Now, I don't think that fundraisers or restaurants or businesses that offer a free drink are doing something nefarious when they do that. But I also don't think that they're doing it 100% in service of me. There is also something in it for them. Again, this doesn't make it bad, but it is worthwhile to just pause and consider, well, what's in it for them? And you can also think about this with something like free alcohol with air travel. So maybe you get free drinks in the lounge or if you're flying in business.

Now, no doubt, it is nice to have a lounge to wait in. It's nice to have a lie-flat seat. But I think with the airline industry in particular, it's like lounges are more and more crowded. Seats, even in business, keep getting narrower and airlines keep finding new ways to charge you for everything. But you still have your free drinks. So often, alcohol can kind of serve as a stand-in for luxury. So if you were to step back, you might actually notice that the

experience is no longer that luxurious, but free alcohol somehow makes it feel premium for our brain. So the swap here isn't to get cynical, it's just to get curious, just to ask yourself, why is someone offering me a free drink? Is there something in it for them?

All right, swap number three. The thrill of a free drink is leftover logic from when I was broke. Now, I really like this one because well, it really hits home. I think back to my very first job out of college. I was 21. I got invited to a special fundraiser dinner through my job. It was at a fancy restaurant in Manhattan. It was the kind of place at that point in my life that I would never set foot in on my own because I never could have afforded it. And all the drinks were free. So I went straight from work on a completely empty stomach to this really nice bar, and I started drinking, and I kept drinking because in part, it was free. To my 21-year-old self, passing up free alcohol would have been crazy. But of course, I drank way too much. I got way too drunk. I had to show up the next day to work, and I just remember so intensely riding the subway to work feeling so humiliated, like, "I don't know how I'm going to get through the day."

But if I back up for a second and I go back to myself entering that restaurant, why was I so excited? Yes, I really liked to drink back then, but it wasn't just all about the alcohol. It was about having an experience that otherwise I couldn't have afforded, because when I was living in New York City, straight out of college, I really struggled with money. I was counting every penny. And so much of the "it's free" logic in my brain had to do with me wanting to take advantage of something that I truly could not have afforded back then. But here's the thing, as I got older and older and I started making more money, I didn't change the mindset. I kept this idea, this logic that I couldn't pass up a free drink even when it was something like cheap champagne or bottom shelf liquor.

So where was all that excitement coming from? Well, for me, I realized that part of it was coming from a pathway that had been laid down in my brain when I had very little money. In my 20s, alcohol was a real expense. It was

a line item that I actually really felt. So free alcohol genuinely felt like a windfall. My brain learned, "Hey, free drinks are a score," at a time when that was actually true for me. But that belief system kept running even as my conditions changed.

So when you feel that little jolt, that little excitement of like, "Ooh, free drinks," you can just kind of pause and ask yourself, is this 100% about the drink? Or is this partially about a version of me for whom free alcohol used to actually be a real windfall? Is this leftover logic from when I didn't have a lot of money? So you're not really fighting with the excitement in the moment, you're just noticing, does this belong to a part of me that I have outgrown? And often, when you're able to realize like, "Oh, that logic is coming from my broke 20-year-old self," it might help loosen the allure a little bit.

So these are your three swaps. Number one, when the drink is free, my brain is only doing half the math. Number two, I wonder if there's something in it for them. And number three, the thrill of a free drink is leftover logic from when I was broke. As always, the goal here is just to get curious about what "free" leaves out and what parts of the story it's not really telling. Because sometimes all it takes is a little pause, a little shift, a little moment of questioning that thought, "Ooh, it's a free drink," to make a different decision.

If you want to understand more about how the upgrade and the reward archetypes work and in part how they lean on stories like, "Ooh, it's free, it would be silly to pass this up," take the quiz at FindYourDrinkType.com or check out The Ultimate Guide to Drinking Less at RachelHart.com. All right, that's it for today. I will see you next week.

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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.