Ep #489: Sticking to my goal of one drink [Listener Q&A]



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Rachel Hart

Ep #489: Sticking to my goal of one drink [Listener Q&A]

I'm answering a listener question today about how to stick to your goal of only having one drink, especially when you're in a situation where the alcohol is flowing and everyone around you is having more. It's really easy to make a plan ahead of time and think, okay, today I'm only going to have one, but then you finish that first drink, and you want another, and your brain starts offering up all sorts of reasons for why having more makes sense and maybe even someone refills your glass or gets you another without you even asking.

This is episode 489, and I'm going to explain why most people prepare for the wrong things in these situations and what you need to practice instead that will help teach your brain how to follow through on your commitment.

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 we have a listener question from Eileen who wrote, "I have a family dinner tonight and the wine usually pours freely. Any tips for sticking to my goal of having only one?" This used to be kind of my holy grail question, like, how do I figure out how to just have one? How to stick to my plan? How to keep my commitment when everyone else around me is drinking more? When I am surrounded by temptation.

And I will tell you, I was stuck in this place for so long because I just kept giving myself a number and then I kept blowing right past it. Right? And the closer I got to the event or wherever I was going, I would find myself hemming and hawing. I would start having all these reasons why, well, maybe this plan wasn't a good idea. Maybe I should make an exception. And most of the time, as soon as I started drinking, I either simply forgot all about my intentions or I actively decided not to follow through on them.

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And the mistake I made, and it's the mistake that you're probably making too, is when you make a plan, and whatever that plan looks like, but you make the plan and you say, okay, I'm only having one drink. What happens is that pretty much all of your attention just focuses on the number. That's where your attention is. How do I make the number happen? And of course, if you've struggled with making the number happen in the past, you're probably focusing on the need to have a really strong commitment, to be disciplined, to have willpower in that moment. But what I want you to consider is it's a little bit like you have decided on the answer to a math problem without having any idea how the equation works. Like you just write down a number and expect that you should be able to follow it.

And saying “I'm only going to have one drink tonight,” it gives you the number, but it doesn't help you work the problem. It doesn't help you work the equation. It really is based on the logic of, I should know better. How many times have you thought that to yourself? I should know better, or I should have learned my lesson by now. This is the logic that so many of us get trapped in when it comes to drinking less, but frankly, when it comes to changing most of our unwanted behaviors. It is so easy to assume when we have negative consequences, when we don't like how much we're currently drinking, when we have a lot of good reasons why we want to make this change. It's so easy to assume that, okay, our brain should just learn to not want to do more of this thing. Right? It should know better.

And I talk about this all the time on the podcast all about what your brain is learning from drinking. It's not just learning about the consequences. If it was just learning about the consequences, it would be a lot easier. But it's not. It's learning about why your brain believes alcohol is valuable. That's in large part the purpose of understanding the drink archetypes that come up for you because they show you very clearly the value that your brain has assigned and has learned from drinking in a specific moment.

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So maybe your brain is saying, oh, more means more relaxation or more fun or more connection or more ability to keep this feeling going. Whatever it is, and again, that changes situation to situation, your brain has not just learned about the consequences. And the consequences of how much you drink do not automatically erase everything that your brain knows about the benefits of drinking.

This is why I really encourage people to be able to hold both the upsides and the downsides together. And this was really a radical departure for me in my own relationship with alcohol when I stopped really focusing exclusively on the downsides and I looked at how my drinking was helping me. And just the phrasing of that question, how is my drinking helping me? It felt so weird and so foreign, but it was so incredibly beneficial and powerful to look at it that way, to understand that it wasn't just consequences. If it was only consequences, if it was all downsides, you wouldn't want to drink.

So when you decide I'm only having one, you're trying to interrupt the part of your brain that is predicting not only that alcohol is valuable, but that more of it will be more valuable for what you want to experience in that moment. And that is part of what we do not prepare for. That is why just saying to yourself, which I said to myself again and again, "Rachel, don't be dumb. Just be responsible. Right? Remember what happened last time." Those sentiments make a lot of sense. They sound very logical in the moment. They're just not a great strategy.

None of them actually address the value your brain has assigned to drinking. And that's something that you can really understand with the drink archetypes, but today what we're really going to focus on are pieces that you need to prepare in advance. Again, how you will prepare may look different depending on the archetype. So I'm going to try to give you things that are going to be more general that apply to all eight archetypes. And

again, I know it might be weird to think of your brain assigning value to alcohol, but it most certainly has. It is not all downsides for your brain.

And so this I think is a little bit of Eileen's problem. This was my problem. This is most everyone's problem. You're preparing for how much you want to drink, and you aren't preparing for how it's going to feel to stop at that number. Part of you may imagine that if you're really committed and if you know what's good for you, then stopping should be pretty straightforward. And then when it doesn't feel that way, when we want more, when we have a good reason, when it feels awkward saying no, it's easy to assume that our plan is falling apart when in reality, this is exactly how it's supposed to feel.

So there are three things that I recommend and I'm going to walk you through the three of them. The first is simply to prepare to want more. Prepare to want more. Having a goal of stopping at one drink or stopping at two drinks, whatever your goal is, having that goal does not mean that you can force your brain to stop wanting after you have had your allotted amount. It might sound really obvious, but when the logic of “I should know better” is running the show, it is really easy to assume that in the moment, you should also know better than to want more.

So you can have a million good reasons why you should stop and still discover once you start drinking, your brain is like, no, more is a good idea. Right, because think of what you have been practicing up until this point. Your brain has practiced, I want more and then I drink more. I want more and then I drink more. This is the sequence, right? This is the sequence happening over and over again. Your brain is learning that the feeling of wanting is answered by the action of having more.

This was a really wild thing for me to wrap my brain around to realize that I needed to teach my brain that wanting more wasn't automatically answered by having more. And I will tell you for the longest time, I just kept waiting for my wanting to go away. I didn't want my brain to want more. I wanted to just

have as much as I had decided on and then have no more desire. Right? I wanted the wanting to go away.

But why would my brain suddenly start doing that when my pattern had been the exact opposite? I think it's really wild to realize that this is the pattern that you're stuck in, that you have this idea that you shouldn't want more. You shouldn't have that additional desire. Rather than, oh, I can actually learn how to tolerate wanting more. I can tolerate having desire for more of something without acting on that desire.

This is a mindset shift because we often get the opposite message. The message that we so often get is, listen, if you have trouble stopping yourself from going overboard, frankly, with anything in life, right? We get this around alcohol, but we get it around lots of things. If you have trouble stopping yourself going overboard, what you need to do is remove the source of temptation from your life. If you can't stop eating the chips, don't buy the chips, don't have them in the house. If you can't stop scrolling on the apps, delete the apps. If you can't stop racking up debt, cut up your credit cards. And if you can't stop yourself from having another drink, just don't drink.

This is so much of the message that we get. And listen, I do not think that there is something wrong with deciding to remove certain things from your life to make your life easier to manage. But I do think this is where a lot of people get caught. When they say to themselves, I don't want to manage this desire, so they remove the source of it. But then what happens? You eventually find yourself bringing it back into your life because you haven't actually investigated the value that it still holds for your brain. I think this is why so many people flip-flop from this position of either I can totally abstain, or I can give myself permission to have the thing, but then I feel like I don't have any control.

And it's also easy to get stuck in the place of saying, listen, I don't want to remove this thing, whatever this temptation is, I don't want to remove that

thing entirely from my life. So maybe, for example, you're saying, I want to keep drinking, but I also think that once I've decided on a certain number, I should know better and not desire more. That is a trap that so many people I work with find themselves in. They don't want to want more. But if you want to drink in moderation, then there's no two ways around it. You need to learn how to manage the desire for more. And just giving yourself a rule and having a lot of good reasons why that rule makes sense, that's not going to make your desire magically go away. You have to start to build the capacity to let yourself and your body feel the desire for more, feel the wanting, and not immediately act on it. Let it pass.

And listen, you will have a lot of reasons why you believe in that moment you should act on it. This is the other thing. I was often waiting for this magical moment where I would just stop having all my excuses and justifications. And I've talked about this on the podcast, The Rolodex of Excuses. My brain would just keep flipping through excuse after excuse after excuse until we landed on one that Rachel believed. I had so many. Oh, it's a special occasion. Everyone else is having more. You know, one more isn't a big deal. I barely even got a buzz from that one drink. Why am I being so restrictive? I had so many.

And often the presence of excuses or justifications to me felt like, oh, that's the evidence of a problem. That's the evidence that I'm not really committed. I was waiting for this moment where there was just no more inner turmoil, no more struggle, no more disagreement with myself in the moment with the part of me that had earlier on set a limit for myself. But nothing has gone wrong when your excuses and justifications show up. The goal isn't to stop having them appear. The skill is learning how to follow through with your goal in their presence.

I think about the excuses and justifications that the brain will offer us. I think of it almost like the resistance that I feel when I'm working out and how much I so often want to stop in the middle of my workout. If I am doing a

hard climb on Peloton and my legs are really burning, I often have a lot of thoughts about why this is too hard and why I can't do this and why I should stop. That is not evidence that the workout isn't working. That's the workout. And just like I don't need my legs to stop burning in order to keep pedaling, you don't need the justifications to disappear in order to complete the climb. Eventually, you teach yourself, hey, you know what? I was wrong. My brain was wrong. I could actually do this.

The discomfort changes, the urge passes, but in terms of exercise, right, I only learn that by staying on the bike. The justifications aren't getting in the way of practice, they are the practice. And listen, I don't want this to sound like, oh, following through is always going to be really hard. It's always going to be this intense burn. Think about what happens with exercise. When you challenge your body routinely, it adapts. You get stronger. Your capacity increases. The same workout that once felt incredibly difficult becomes something that you can handle with much less effort.

Something similar happens when you practice not answering your wanting to have more with the action of giving yourself more. At first, those justifications feel incredibly compelling. They feel so true. It feels very uncomfortable, but the more you practice hearing those thoughts without automatically acting on them, the more you practice believing that your brain is not always right. It's not always telling the truth. It does not always know what the future holds, the less powerful they start to feel. It's not necessarily that the brain never offers you the thought, oh, you know what, one more drink won't matter. It's not that that stops forever. It's that the thought doesn't carry the same weight. You recognize it. You've heard it before. You know what it is. You know why it's there. You know the archetype that it's connected to, and you have practiced not needing to obey what that thought is telling you to do.

What once felt like a huge hill starts to feel a lot more manageable. Not because you're just getting better at saying no, but because you're building

the capacity to want something, to have a compelling reason to go through, to answer your desire, but you're building the capacity of not automatically acting. That is the first thing to do, to simply prepare to want more.

The second thing is to prepare for other people making it harder. And this isn't going to apply in every single situation with every single archetype, but I do think that it's worth touching on this because it does show up for so many people. Now, I don't mean that the people in your life are going to necessarily give you a hard time. Maybe they will, I don't know.

What I do know is that you will probably encounter people behaving in ways that you wish they didn't. So, maybe someone will offer you more. Maybe someone will start topping off your glass without asking or handing you another drink without you asking for it, or maybe someone will say, oh, come on, have another. It's a party. It's so rare that we're all together. Or maybe someone will start asking you questions like, why aren't you having more? You usually have more.

Again, this is where I fell into this trap of fixating on how everyone around me was making it harder, making it harder for me to follow through on my own goals. I wanted a magic wand where I could ensure that if I decided only to have one drink, after that drink was done, no one offered me another. Nobody topped off my glass. Nobody brought me another drink without asking. The waiter didn't ask if I wanted another. No one cajoled me into having another. And I definitely didn't want anyone asking me any questions or inquiring as to why I was stopping. As far as I was concerned, everyone should have zero comment, zero opinion on my choices.

And again, it makes so much sense why we fall into this pattern, but it will keep you stuck. Imagine for a moment, if you decided that you would only drive your car, if you could guarantee that nobody ever cut you off, nobody ever tailgated you, nobody ever honked at you, nobody ever acted erratically when you were driving. Right? It sounds ridiculous. But of course, we would all prefer that, you know, other drivers are careful and

paying attention and driving safely. But if you make your ability to get behind the wheel contingent on every other driver on the road behaving in a certain way, behaving how you want, you're never going to leave the house.

Part of becoming a good driver is learning how to respond to an unpredictable environment, learning how to respond to situations that you don't leave the house wishing that they would happen, wishing that somebody would cut you off or wishing that someone's going to blow through a stop sign. Right? Because no matter how hard we try, we just don't control how other people drive. We don't control other people's behavior, and I think the same thing is true here.

Of course, it would be easier if nobody offered you a drink or topped off your glass or asked why you weren't having more. But notice how much energy you can waste wishing that everyone else would behave differently and how little the wishing actually changes the situation for you. You end up focusing your energy on the part of the equation you have the least amount of control over. The skill is learning, can I say no to another drink and let it feel awkward, and not turn that awkwardness into reason I should give in? Can someone fill my glass without asking? And I don't turn around and say to myself, well, I mean, they poured it, so now I need to drink it. Can I feel people's questions and let it feel uncomfortable without believing, you know what, I should just drink so then I don't have to answer any questions so then I won't feel uncomfortable.

That is a place I was in for so long. I so did not want it to feel uncomfortable. I didn't like the relationship that I had with alcohol. I did not like my drinking, but there was a part of me that was just like, it's just easier to drink. Right? It's easier to do this thing that I actually don't fully like doing. I don't like the role that it's playing in my life because I just hate the discomfort so much. But people are going to be people. They may say things or offer you a drink or ask questions, maybe because they're well-

meaning, maybe because they're clueless, maybe because they're rude, maybe because they're trying to deflect attention away from themselves. The point is not convincing yourself that you need people to show up a certain way so that you can succeed, just like you don't need people to drive a certain way so that you are willing to drive yourself.

Again, you don't make any discomfort you feel as evidence that you're doing something wrong or that your plan isn't working. Part of what you may be practicing is simply allowing someone to offer you more and saying no thanks, and having that feel weird because of course it feels weird for your brain if you're used to following the question of would you like another with yes, please. Your brain is like, this is not what we do. Why are we saying no, thanks? This is weird. But that's normal.

Part of what you are trying to change here is that knee-jerk response. And any time we're trying to change something that feels habitual, it feels automatic, it is going to feel a little clunky at first. Retraining your brain around all the cues that you have learned as reason to drink more and have another is part of your work.

And finally, I think you need to prepare for stopping to not feel like enough. Enough was something that I chased for years without really ever articulating to myself what enough actually meant. And again, I think this changes on the archetype. I think it changes on the situation. Sometimes for me, enough was, I don't want to feel even one iota of self-consciousness. Sometimes feeling like enough meant, well, I just don't even feel like myself anymore. That's what I wanted. I didn't want to feel like Rachel. Sometimes enough was the ability to just completely forget whatever had been previously bothering me earlier in the day. I didn't want to think about it at all. Sometimes enough was feeling like, oh, that moment where I know that I've reached the peak feeling of relaxation without believing that I could relax a little bit more or that it could somehow make it even a little bit better.

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But usually, I mistook the feeling for enough as, oh, I'm not wanting more. Except that by the time I didn't want more, I was usually pretty drunk at that point. And so I was usually really experiencing some of the effects of impairment that I didn't like. I talk a lot about the difference between wanting and liking, and we tend to use these words interchangeably, but they are not one in the same. We tend to assume that we want things because we enjoy them and we enjoy the things that we want.

And most of the time, that assumption works pretty well, but there is a difference. Liking evaluates how pleasurable an experience is. Wanting motivates you to pursue experiences your brain believes are valuable. Most of the time, these systems do work together, but they're not the same system. Things that are valuable also tend to feel good. That's why we naturally confuse wanting and liking. But it's so important to remember, they're not the same thing. The systems are separate, and they can drift apart.

Sometimes you really want that fourth slice of pizza, only to realize it was not as satisfying as your brain had promised. Or sometimes you really don't want to lace up your shoes and go for a run, but once you're out there, you end up enjoying it. This was so powerful for me to understand this, to understand and remind myself that the intensity of my wanting was not at all a reliable measure of how much I would actually enjoy an experience. And in fact, what I wanted was often actually a very poor indication of what I actually ended up liking.

So instead of trying to feel like you've had enough, let it feel like not enough. I think imagining this ahead of time can be really helpful to imagine yourself feeling unsatisfied, to imagine yourself wanting more, maybe even to imagine yourself feeling a little deprived or annoyed or resentful, and imagine how all of those feelings would be okay. What would make them okay? And not okay in the sense that they disappear and go away, but okay in like, all right, nothing has gone wrong here.

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Again, I think we have to stop assuming the practice is getting to this magical place where we just drink less and automatically feel satisfied. It's instead discovering that we can feel unsatisfied and still stop because feeling unsatisfied is not a problem.

So ultimately, I don't want you to just prepare for the logistics of how much you want to have. I want you to prepare for the actual experience of what it is like to have that. The wanting more, the people offering you more or pouring you more, preparing for it to not feel like enough, because what you are actually preparing for in that moment is not, I should just have discipline or I should really know better. What you are preparing for is acceptance.

Acceptance that you might want more, you might have convincing reasons why you should say yes. Someone might offer you more, it might feel awkward to decline. Stopping might leave you feeling like you are unfinished. You have not had enough. And none of those things mean that you can't follow through. That is the shift. Don't prepare only for how much you want to drink, prepare for how it's going to feel to stop.

All right, Eileen, thanks for sending that question in. If you want to send me a question for consideration on the podcast, you can go to RachelHart.com/podq. That's P O D Q. All right, everybody, that's it for today. 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?

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