Ep #491: What If My Drinking Isn't Causing Problems? [Listener Q&A]



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Rachel Hart

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What if your drinking isn't causing any problems in your life? You're doing well at work, your relationships are good, and you don't seem to have any real downsides. Does it really make sense to question your drinking if nothing is really going wrong? Or are you just creating a problem where there isn't one? This is episode 491, and I'm explaining why you don't have to dismiss the benefits of drinking in order to get curious about your relationship with alcohol, and why you don't need to have a problem with drinking in order to decide that you want to change.

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 answering a listener question from Chris about what you should do when your drinking isn't really causing any problems in your life. Here's what Chris wrote.

"Hi Rachel, I loved episode 488, Why do I drink when I don't enjoy it? Thank you. It's bang on for me. At this point, once you've reflected on how it's helping, for me, drinking offers relief, lessens boredom, and a bit of fun. Where do you go from there? If the positives of drinking for me are true, which I believe they are, then do I just accept that and continue the same drinking? For me, drinking doesn't cause a problem in my life. Work, family, all good. Maybe the problem is thinking there's a problem. I love your podcasts. They really help."

Okay, Chris, well, I love your question and I actually want to start with something you said towards the end. You wrote, "Maybe the problem is thinking there's a problem." Because I think you're on to something here, not necessarily because you're imagining something that isn't there, but because the word "problem" feels so loaded when we talk about alcohol. Think about what happens when you ask yourself, do I have a problem with

drinking? For most people, this is not a neutral question. It is really loaded because we've been taught that having a problem with alcohol means you'll never be able to trust yourself. You need to stop drinking forever. And so, of course, that word feels really loaded because look at everything that comes along with it.

I will tell you that I circled in this place for a long time, both wondering if I had a problem with my drinking, and also spending a lot of time gathering evidence that I didn't. I would tell myself, "Well, Rachel, you don't drink every day and you've gone long periods without drinking and it's not like you experience withdrawal when you don't have alcohol." And all of those things were true, but I was also creating an incredibly high bar for myself. It was almost like I had to justify something being sufficiently bad before I was justified in wanting to change it. And that, I think, is kind of fascinating. Like, why do we need any consequences to feel justified in wanting to make a change in our life? Not just with drinking, but with anything in life. Why not just make a change because we want to and not because there's a problem?

Why does something have to be causing problems, maybe in your marriage or your career, or your health or your finances, before it's worth paying attention to or before you're allowed to want to do something different? Why isn't it enough to say, you know what? Something about this doesn't feel aligned with what I want. And I think this is where the whole conversation about having a problem with alcohol can lead us astray because you, like me, can spend years going back and forth trying to answer the question, do I really have a problem? When perhaps there's a much simpler question waiting underneath it. Do I like my current relationship with alcohol? Not asking yourself, is it bad enough? Not saying, "Well, would someone else look at my drinking and say, 'Oh, you have a problem?'" Not asking, am I drinking more than the people around me? Just getting curious with this question. Is my current relationship with alcohol working for me? That is such a different place to start.

And Chris, I think this is especially relevant to what you're describing because you say that your drinking isn't causing problems in your life, work is good, your family's good, everything is fine, but something did bring you here. Something led you to start listening to a podcast about changing your relationship with alcohol. Something inside of episode 488 resonated with you. And I don't want to make assumptions about what that something is for you, but I do want you to get curious about it. Maybe you're drinking more than you want to. Maybe you find yourself thinking about alcohol more than you like. Maybe there's a lot of chatter in your head about when you're going to drink and how much you're going to have and whether you should have another, or waking up the next day and wondering, why didn't I stop sooner? Or maybe you can't even put your finger on what it is. Maybe there's just something about your relationship with alcohol that just feels a little off to you.

And here's the thing. No one else has to agree with you that something feels off. Maybe your drinking looks exactly like everyone else around you. Maybe nobody in your life would ever think to question it. Maybe if you told someone that you were thinking about drinking less or you were listening to this podcast, they would look at you and say, "Why? You don't have a problem." But they're not you. They're not the ones experiencing your relationship with alcohol. You are. And I think learning to listen to that little voice inside of us, that sense that something isn't quite the way we want it to be is an incredibly, incredibly important skill. Not because that voice is proof that you have a problem, but because it's information that something inside of you is out of alignment. And I think that is always worth exploring.

And ultimately, that's what I want for you and everyone who listens to this podcast. I want you to have a relationship with alcohol that works for you. Not one that other people think is normal, not one that other people agree isn't a problem, one that actually feels right to you, whatever that looks like.

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Now, I want to come back to the first part of your question because I think this will help you see where to go next. You said that you've reflected on how drinking helps you. You mentioned it gives you relief. It makes things less boring. It helps you have a bit of fun. And you ask, okay, well, if those positives are real, where do I go from there? Do I just accept them and keep drinking the same?

I want to be really clear about something. You don't have to convince yourself that the benefits of drinking are imaginary in order to change your relationship with alcohol. I think this is one of the places where people get stuck. They really believe that in order to drink less or to stop drinking, they somehow need to stop seeing alcohol as having any benefit. They need to convince themselves that it doesn't actually help them relax, that it doesn't make things more fun, that it doesn't help them when they feel bored. But that's not what I'm asking you to do. Alcohol does have rewarding effects that humans enjoy. I don't think that pretending otherwise is particularly useful.

The question I would encourage you to explore is not simply what am I getting from drinking, it's what might my brain be learning when I repeatedly turn to alcohol to get those things? Because those are two very different questions, and the answer to the first question doesn't necessarily tell you anything about the answer to the second question.

So let's take boredom for example. You mentioned that drinking sometimes helps make things less boring, and I want to use this example because it connects to the Hourglass archetype. So this is one of the eight drink archetypes. If you are new to this podcast, if it's the first time you're hearing about the archetypes, you can learn more about them by taking a quiz at FindYourDrinkType.com.It's a couple minutes and you will get your top two archetypes.

So there are a couple archetypes to what Chris is describing, but we're just going to focus on the Hourglass. The Hourglass is all about pouring a drink

to make things less boring or to make certain situations or certain people more tolerable. So maybe you're bored, maybe you're doing something tedious, maybe you're spending time with people you don't find particularly interesting, and having a drink seems to make the experience better. Now, again, I'm not going to argue with you about whether or not alcohol can make something feel less boring. Of course it can. What I want you to consider is what happens when your brain repeatedly learns I don't have to feel bored because I can pour a drink.

Think about how this works in other areas of our life. I don't have to feel bored, I can pick up my phone. I don't have to feel bored, I can scroll through Instagram. I don't have to feel bored, I can just see what's new on Facebook Marketplace. I don't have to feel bored, I can just find something to check off on my to-do list. As a society, we have become incredibly good at finding ways to distract ourselves from boredom. And we do this so automatically that most of the time we don't even notice what's happening. There's a moment when we feel bored and almost immediately we're reaching for something to make the feeling go away.

But here's the thing about boredom. Boredom isn't necessarily a problem that needs to be solved. And yet so often we treat it like one. We act as if there's something wrong with a moment that isn't sufficiently interesting or entertaining or stimulating, as if the goal of life is to make sure that we never have to experience a dull moment. But our brains aren't meant to be constantly stimulated. We're not supposed to find every moment of our lives endlessly enjoyable. And when we keep reaching for something to relieve boredom, we may actually be making boredom harder to tolerate in the future.

Think about that for a second. The very thing you're doing to make boredom more tolerable might be making you less tolerant of boredom over time. Because your brain is learning that boredom is something to escape. And the more often you escape it, the less practice you get simply allowing

it to be there and not be a problem. So you can end up in this strange cycle. You become quicker to feel bored and less willing to experience boredom when it shows up, and suddenly you find yourself needing more and more stimulation just so you don't feel bored.

Now, notice what I'm pointing to here. I'm not talking about getting drunk. I'm not talking about drinking so much you embarrass yourself or getting into an argument with your spouse. I'm talking about something much more subtle. I'm talking about what your brain is learning through repetition. And I think that's something we often overlook when we assess whether drinking is causing problems in our life. We look for obvious external consequences. We ask ourselves questions like, "Did I drink too much? Did I do something I regret? Did I upset someone? Did I feel terrible the next day?" But what about the less obvious consequences? What about the ways that relying on alcohol might be shaping how you experience your life when you're not drinking?

That's where I think the archetypes become so useful because they help you see that the downside isn't always about the amount that you're consuming. Sometimes it's just about the relationship you're developing with the very thing you're using the drink to manage. And with the Hourglass archetype, that relationship is often about boredom.

Now, I will tell you, I have an eight-year-old son and lately he has been telling me a lot that he is bored. And my response usually is, "Great. Boredom is amazing." Which I'm sure you can imagine is not the response he's hoping for. But I actually want him to learn this because I think boredom gets a bad rap. We treat it as this pointless, unpleasant emotion that we should try to get rid of as quickly as possible. But think about what happens when your brain isn't constantly being entertained, when you're not scrolling or swiping or watching something or checking something off a list. That's often when your brain has space for something else to emerge, where you can start to make connections and have insights and new ideas

and ask yourself questions that you hadn't before considered, and maybe you find a solution to something you've been wrestling with, or a moment of noticing something that you might have otherwise missed.

Boredom creates space for curiosity. It creates space for creativity. It creates space for discovery, but only if we're willing to experience it instead of immediately trying to make it disappear. And one of the things that I teach with the Hourglass archetype is that boredom is only a pointless emotion when you fail to look inside of it. And I really do believe that. Because people are endlessly fascinating. You are endlessly fascinating. The world around you is endlessly astonishing. The fact that we're even here, that we exist at all, is pretty miraculous when you stop to think about it.

I think as human beings, we have this deep craving for awe and wonder. We want to feel interested in our lives. We want to feel engaged. We want to experience something beyond the mundane. But sometimes awe and wonder are found precisely by paying attention to these mundane moments, by slowing down enough to notice what's right in front of us, by allowing our minds to wander, by getting curious about something that at first glance doesn't seem particularly interesting, and by letting ourselves be bored. And yet so often we divert that craving into something else. We pick up our phone, we scroll, we eat, we busy ourselves, we pour a drink. And we miss the opportunity to discover what might have been there if we'd stayed with that feeling just a little bit longer.

So Chris, I want to bring you back to your question because you ask, what do you do once you've identified the benefits of drinking? The answer is you get curious about what's on the other side. Not because the benefits aren't real, but because something that can genuinely feel helpful in the moment can also be creating a pattern that may not be serving you in the long run. If drinking makes boredom more tolerable, what happens to your ability to tolerate boredom without it? If drinking helps you relax, what

happens to your confidence in your ability to relax on your own? If drinking makes things more fun, what happens to your expectations about how much fun you can have when you're not drinking?

These aren't questions I'm asking you to answer with some predetermined conclusion. They're questions that I want you to investigate because it's very easy to say, "Well listen, I don't need a drink to relax. I don't need to drink to have fun. I don't need to have a drink when I'm bored." And maybe that is completely true. But I would encourage you to pay attention to what happens when you choose not to drink. Because so many times people will say to me, "Oh, Rachel, I'm fine without it."

And I always think that word choice is so interesting. I'm fine not drinking. I'm fine going to the party and not having a drink. I'm fine not having a drink at a fancy dinner. But is fine what you're really going for in life? Most of us don't want to just feel fine. We want to enjoy ourselves, we want to be relaxed, we want to have fun. And so I would get curious about whether there's a part of you that feels like something is missing when you don't drink.

So maybe you're perfectly capable of not drinking, but there's a little part of you that wishes you could in that moment. Or maybe you find yourself thinking, "This would be better if I had another." Or maybe you just feel a little deprived saying no to yourself. I think those moments are so worth paying attention to. Again, not because they mean you have a problem, because they're leaving a trail of breadcrumbs. They're showing you where your brain has started to associate alcohol with making certain experiences better or easier, and that is important because the brain loves to default to what is easy. And if having a drink is the easiest way you know to make something less boring, then that's what your brain is going to suggest, again and again. And the more often you follow that suggestion, the more familiar that pathway becomes.

Meanwhile, the other pathways, the ones that don't involve alcohol, may start to feel a little less appealing. Not because you're incapable of taking them, but because they require something different from you. Maybe they require a little patience, maybe a willingness to feel a little uncomfortable, maybe the effort of figuring out what you would actually do instead to make an experience more interesting or enjoyable. And here's where I think this can start to really matter when it comes to trying to change your drinking and change your relationship with alcohol. If your brain has learned that alcohol makes something better, it's going to be harder to say no on the days when you've decided not to drink. And if your brain has learned that alcohol makes something better, it may also start to assume that more alcohol is going to make it even better. So then it will be hard to say no to more. That is one of the reasons why stopping can feel so challenging. You're not just deciding whether or not to have more, you're also confronting the belief that more might make your experience better.

And that's why I think it's so important to understand what your brain is learning rather than simply focusing on whether your drinking is causing obvious problems. Because you may be functioning beautifully in every area of your life. You may be doing well at work, you may have a wonderful family and wonderful relationships, you may have no dramatic consequences from your drinking. And still, there may be something about your relationship with alcohol that you just want to change, and that is enough to go on.

Now, none of this means that you shouldn't drink to relax or have fun or relieve boredom. I'm not interested in giving you another set of rules about when drinking is or isn't acceptable. What I'm interested in is helping you understand what is actually happening so that you can make a more informed choice. Because there's a difference between enjoying a drink and feeling like something is missing when you don't have one. And the more you understand that difference, the more freedom you have to decide

what actually works for you and the easier it is not only to say no, but to say no to having more.

So Chris, I wouldn't tell you to simply accept the positives of drinking and continue exactly as you are, but I also wouldn't tell you that you need to find a problem with your drinking in order to justify changing it. I would just encourage you to keep investigating, keep getting curious about what alcohol does for you, but also what happens when you don't turn to it.

Notice what feels harder, notice what feels like it's missing, notice where your brain wants to take the easy route. And rather than interpreting any of that as evidence that something is wrong, see if you can just approach it as an opportunity to learn. Because ultimately, that is what this work is about. It's not about teaching you that you can't trust yourself. It's not about giving you a better system to police yourself. And it's also not about trying to convince you that if only you understood the truth about alcohol and how bad it is for you, you would never want to drink again.

It's about understanding your relationship with alcohol well enough that you can decide what you actually want it to look like. And I think that's a much more interesting question than simply asking yourself whether or not your drinking is causing problems. Because the goal isn't to have a relationship with alcohol that looks acceptable from the outside, the goal is to have a relationship with alcohol that feels right to you. And you're allowed to want that, and you're allowed to want to change even when everything else in your life looks great.

All right, Chris, I hope that answers your question. If you have a question that you would like me to answer on the podcast, you can go to RachelHart.com/podq. That's P O D Q. 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.