Ep #492: When Drinking Less Feels Impossible



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Rachel Hart

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As we head into the final months of the year, maybe you're already thinking that there's just no point in trying to drink less during the holidays because you've got parties and family gatherings and then all the stress, and it just makes sense to wait until January when everything settles down. But what if the situations that make you want to put your goal of drinking less on hold are actually the ones where you have the most to learn from? This is episode 492, and I'm explaining how the inclination to postpone the work of drinking less can turn into the very thing keeping you stuck.

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.

So Halloween is right around the corner, and I want to talk about a pattern that used to show up for me year after year. I watch it show up with so many of the people that I work with, and I will tell you, for me, this pattern showed up with both my eating and my drinking. As soon as those bowls of Halloween candy would start showing up in the office, I would begin telling myself that there was just no point of even trying to eat less or drink less around this time of year.

And now, for me, overeating and overdrinking felt like they really went hand in hand, like I had just no control and a tendency to go overboard on both food and alcohol. And I know this isn't true for everyone. I work with many people who have a ton of discipline around food, and they are incredibly health conscious, and they don't understand why this discipline doesn't carry over into their drinking. They don't understand how it's possible for them to be so regimented about following a meal plan and so particular about their health, and then turn around and drink in a way that they feel undermines all of that. And this really will depend based on the drink archetype that is showing up for you.

But I will tell you, no matter which camp you fall into, whether or not you feel like overeating and overdrinking, it's like you do all the things too much, or if it feels like overdrinking is different and unique in terms of it doesn't look like how you show up in the rest of your life, again and again, the underlying pattern that I see people get into, no matter what it looks like for you, is that during the last quarter of the year, everybody essentially decides that this is the point where trying to change, trying to work on their drinking, trying to drink less, it just doesn't make sense anymore. There's just no point in trying to do the work, in trying to exercise any restraint.

And for me, this pattern usually started right around Halloween. My birthday's in November, then of course Thanksgiving, and then there's Christmas. There's all the office holiday parties, then there's New Year's. For me, there was just so many opportunities to both overindulge and also to not want to restrict myself. There were so many temptations. I didn't want to miss out on the fun, and there was also a lot of stress often in this final stretch of the year. Stress because I was around family a lot, stress because I felt like I was supposed to be having a better time than I was. I was supposed to be feeling more cheerful than I actually did.

And that combination of all the events and all the temptations and all the family and all the stress, it would lead me to deciding, okay, I'm just not going to worry about this right now. I'm just going to stop worrying about what I eat. I'm going to stop worrying about how much I drink. I'm just going to wait until January, and then I'm going to buckle down and I'm going to get serious. And I will tell you, that decision, which I made many, many times in my life, it always felt so reasonable. It actually felt like I was being smart and I was being realistic.

It didn't feel like I was giving up on my goal. It felt like I was making a reasoned decision that now was not the right time, and that's the thing that I want to talk to you about today. How easy it is to convince yourself that postponing change, postponing doing the work on drinking less, is actually the smart thing to do. Because again, it doesn't feel like you're giving up.

And that's what I think is really interesting and also sneaky about this pattern. When you decide to put your goals on hold, it's not like you're saying you're deciding that the goal no longer matters to you. It's not saying that this goal of drinking less is something that you no longer care about. I still really wanted to figure this out. I really wanted to be someone that constantly wasn't in the cycle of eating and drinking more than I wanted to. I didn't want to be in the cycle of waking up the next morning regretting how much I had last night.

So none of that desire to change went away. I just convinced myself that the smart thing to do was to wait. The smart thing to do was to put this work on hold because otherwise I was just setting myself up for failure. And that felt awful, and I didn't want to do that because by the way, this was the time of year where I was supposed to be enjoying myself.

Why would I try cutting back during a time of year where there's so much celebration, there's so much indulgence, there's so much focus on treating yourself? Why would I try to change when I had all of these parties and all of these get-togethers and all of these holidays on the horizon? Why would I try to change when I had a lot of stress coming my way? And seeing certain people could feel very stressful for me. Why would I try to change if there were just going to be so many opportunities tempting me to drink?

In my mind, waiting until January just was the logical thing to do. It made sense, and I think that this pattern is so common. And again, it doesn't just show up around drinking; it can show up with so many of our goals, where we get to this point of the year, haven't made the progress that we want, and just decide, okay, I'm going to give myself a hall pass and I'll restart in the new year. You can still feel completely committed to your goal while at the same time deciding that now is not the right time to work on it. So you're not saying I don't care about making this change. You're saying, I just want to give myself the best chance of succeeding, and right now, these circumstances are not going to do that. They are not ideal. And that line of thinking kept me stuck for so long.

Because here's the thing: Halloween is coming every year. The holidays are coming every year. My birthday is coming every year. All the moments that I told myself were too difficult for me to even attempt to cut back or attempt to say no were the same moments that were just going to keep coming year after year.

Eventually, I realized that all the reasons I had for why now was the wrong time to do this work were actually the moments that I most needed to be practicing these skills and the tools and learning how to navigate. And I want you to think about that for a second. I want you to think about that contradiction. The approach we so often take is now is not the right time. And again, it doesn't just happen around the holidays. I hear people say this around summer. I hear people say this around vacation. There's so many moments during the year when we decide now is not the right time. And so often what we miss when we're doing this is that the moments that we believe are the wrong time for us to be practicing drinking less, practicing saying no to our desire or our desire for more.

These are actually the moments where we most need the practice. These are the moments where we are being called to learn how to show up differently. For me, this often showed up in moments where everybody was having another round and I felt like I needed to join in too. Or moments when I felt really tired and stressed out and exhausted, and I would often revert to the mindset of screw it. I didn't want to feel that way, and that was permission for me to just eat and drink whatever I wanted to. Or if I was around certain people that were difficult for me to be around, certain family members, it would just be easier in my mind to tell myself, ugh, just have a drink. Don't restrict yourself because it's already too difficult to be around them.

Instead of understanding how these moments were actually meant for me to start practicing something different, I was instead telling myself that these situations were the exact reason why I shouldn't practice, why I needed to wait until the new year came. But waiting until January didn't

teach me how to handle any of these situations differently. And yeah, January might have fewer parties or there might be more people in the mindset of, okay, I'm going to make a big change with my drinking or a big change in my life. You might be around more people who are also trying to cut back, and that might make it easier to follow through with your goal for a little while. But what happens the next time a party comes around? What happens the next time you're feeling exhausted or stressed out, or you are in a situation with people who suggest drinking or suggest having another round? What happens then?

Those situations aren't going away throughout the year, and neither is the holiday season. It comes around every single year. And if your solution, which by the way, this was my solution for the longest time too, if your solution is to wait until the circumstances are easier for you to succeed, what are you actually teaching yourself about your ability to say no to your desire? All you're learning is that it can only happen under ideal conditions.

And I'm not saying that you need to throw yourself into every challenging situation this holiday season or you need to figure out how to navigate the holiday period perfectly. What I am saying is that the situations that most often make you want to set your goal aside or put your goal on the back burner are the situations where you need this practice the most. They are the situations that also have the most to teach you about your archetypes, about the particular patterns and excuses and justifications and feelings that lead to drinking more than you want to.

Because drinking less isn't just about deciding how much you're going to drink and then learning how to stick to that number. It's understanding everything that contributes to this pattern that you're trying to change. It's about what happens when following through on that decision feels difficult. It's about recognizing the thoughts that make another drink seem like a good idea. It's about learning how to experience an urge without immediately acting on it. And it's discovering that you can feel whatever is coming up for you and you don't need to drink over it. Again, maybe that's

feeling stress, maybe it's feeling a little awkward at a party, maybe it's feeling like you're missing out if you're not having another round. Whatever it is that's coming up for you, it's really teaching your brain, "Hey, I can actually navigate this moment without reaching for a drink."

And none of that requires that you need to be perfect during this time period. It just requires that you need to be practicing, and then when something doesn't work, learn from that practice. Learn, "Hey, why didn't that work? What was coming up for me? What did I say to myself in the moment?" That is actually how you build and continue to make progress. I just think that there's a really important distinction to make here because sometimes we talk about giving ourselves grace around the holiday period as if that means, so, now I'm not going to have any expectations for myself. Now I'm just going to give myself a free pass to forget about trying to change and eat and drink whatever I want and then just clean it all up in the new year. But you can give yourself grace without also abandoning your goal. You can adjust your expectations without also deciding that your desire to learn something new has to wait, has to sit on the back burner. You can acknowledge that yeah, you have a lot going on and there is more temptation, and maybe you are under more stress.

You can acknowledge all of that and also acknowledge that, yeah, doing this work right now, you're probably not going to get everything right and that's okay. You're probably not going to do it perfectly, but that doesn't mean that this time of year is pointless for you to even try at all. What I will tell you in my own life and what I have seen working with people over and over again is that the work you do in the situations that feel most impossible to say no, most impossible to limit yourself. This work, again, whether it's the holidays, whether it's summer, whether it's vacation, this work where it feels most impossible often proves to be the most transformative, because of what your brain is trying to convince you, because of your brain saying, "Oh, we shouldn't even bother trying." It will be too difficult, it will be too hard. Let's just wait until we get to an easier period.

Ep #492: When Drinking Less Feels Impossible

So I just want you to think about that as we head into the last couple months of the year. What if you went into this last final stretch believing, "Hey, this is actually the most powerful time, the most transformative time for me not to give up on my goal of drinking less, not to give up on my goal of changing my relationship with alcohol"? Not to be perfect, not to make a plan and promise yourself that you're going to perfectly follow it, but to simply just stay committed to practicing the skills that are going to serve you not only for the next year, but for the rest of your life. And for me, that work really did start with Halloween candy. It started with the bowls of Halloween candy that I just felt so much temptation around. It was so difficult for me to say no. It was so difficult for me to have one little mini candy bar and then not follow it up with seven more. And that carried over into my drinking as well.

The ability to learn how to work with your desire, how to notice urges and cravings and be able to pause and observe them without immediately acting on them. To notice the ways in which you justify having the object of your desire or to keep having more for whatever reason because you deserve it, because you already started, because you already had too much so there's no point in stopping now. To just learn how to let yourself experience the feeling of wanting without immediately acting on it. One of the things that I talk about all the time is that what we want is often a pretty poor indicator of what we will actually feel satisfied by and turn out to like.

Of course, there are going to be a lot of moments between now and the end of year where you are faced with temptation, but encountering temptation is not a bad thing. The goal here is not to live in a bubble, and in fact, nobody wants to live in a bubble. If you can only succeed at saying no when you never encounter temptation, your ability to say no, your ability not to act on your desire for more is going to feel very fragile. Encountering temptation is the moment where you need this work the most, where you need to practice a new way of showing up.

Ep #492: When Drinking Less Feels Impossible

And I think so often, at least for me, I had to move away from the belief that I just needed to find the right moment in time or that there was a right time to be working on these goals and there was a wrong time to be working on these goals, to understand that when temptation appeared, when excuses and justifications appeared, when I encountered certain situations that felt like they just wouldn't be the same if I didn't drink or it would be too awkward if I didn't have another, or I would feel like I would be missing out, those were the moments where it was most important for me to start to learn how to show up differently.

And I think one of the reasons we convince ourselves that the holidays are the wrong time to work on our drinking is because we have such a narrow definition of what doing this work actually looks like. We think doing this work means making a plan and then following it perfectly, perfectly saying no, perfectly sticking to a number, perfectly getting it right every time. And so of course when we look around at the parties and the celebrations and the stress and the temptation, we think, why would I set myself up for failure?

But what if doing the work also means noticing the moments where you made an exception and getting curious about it, getting curious about why another drink, why having more seemed so important, paying attention to these moments after the fact, understanding them after the fact, instead of saying the only way that I can make progress is if I do it perfectly every single time. Paying attention after the fact is never wasted effort.

That is how you really start to understand your archetypes and your patterns and why your brain believes that the drink is so important and so necessary and so valuable in that moment. And that means you don't have to wait for a time for everything to feel easier to start making progress. In fact, the moments when changing your drinking feels hardest may be the very moments when you have the most to learn.

So what if the final stretch of this year isn't the worst time for you to try to cut back and work on your drinking? What if it's the best time for you to be

doing this work to set yourself up not only for the next year, but to practice the skills that you need for the rest of your life?

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.