Ep #493: Why Is It So Hard to Stop Drinking Once I Start?



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Rachel Hart

Take a Break from Drinking with Rachel Hart

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Have you ever wondered why even when you know you're going to regret drinking too much, it's still hard to stop yourself once you've started drinking? Why aren't the consequences more persuasive in the moment? This is episode 493 and I'm explaining why our usual explanations for why it's so hard to stop after that first drink miss the bigger picture and how changing your vantage point is the key to figuring out why you keep saying yes to more and how to start 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.

Recently, I hosted a live Q&A where I was answering everyone's questions about how to drink less. And one question that just seemed to come up over and over again was, why is it so hard to stop drinking once I start? And I will tell you, this was also my question for the longest time. I would routinely promise myself that I was only going to have a couple drinks tonight. I was going to be good. I was going to be responsible. And I had plenty of experience with the downsides of having too much to drink and all of the regret I felt. But once I started drinking, it was just like all of that went out the window. It truly felt like once I started, it was just so hard for me to stop myself from going overboard and I didn't understand why.

Now, the typical explanations for why this happens is usually one of two things. First, we say, well, alcohol is an addictive substance and it impairs your judgment. And so of course, once you start drinking, it's hard to stop because it's literally affecting the part of your brain that is in charge of making decisions. The second explanation sounds a little bit like this. Well, some people just can't help themselves. They can't handle alcohol, their brain is different. There's something about the combination of alcohol and your brain that just makes stopping hard if not impossible for you.

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And I will tell you, I circled these explanations for the longest time. Thinking to myself, okay, well, maybe this is what's going on for me. But I also couldn't really make sense of the fact that sometimes I could stop. I didn't always go overboard. I didn't always get too drunk. I didn't always wake up with regrets. Sometimes I was able to moderate. Sometimes I did stop myself. And that was something that came up on this Q&A over and over again. Because when you have the belief, you know, why is it so hard for me to stop drinking once I start, and you have these explanations that we're given about why that happens, and then you look at your own drinking and you understand, yes, I am drinking too much. Yes, I want to change. But also, sometimes I do stop. I don't always go overboard. Sometimes I can reign myself in. The whole situation just is so confusing.

Because if alcohol is the thing that's making it impossible for you to stop, or if there's something fundamentally different about your brain, well, how does that explain the times when you're able to? That's what I could never really wrap my brain around. Neither explanation seemed to account for what was actually happening and so I just felt more lost.

What I will tell you is that the problem with both of these explanations is that they don't really leave you anywhere to go. If the problem is that alcohol impairs your judgment, well, okay, what are you going to do about that? You can't change alcohol. And if the problem is that your brain is somehow different from a normal brain that can handle alcohol, well, again, how are you supposed to change that? So at least for me, both of these explanations left me feeling totally stuck, but they also didn't align, they didn't explain with why sometimes I didn't go overboard. And so I just felt more and more lost.

What I want you to consider today is this. I want you to consider if you're investigating your decisions around drinking from the wrong vantage point. Here's what I mean. Most people, when they want to drink less, what do we do? We tend to focus on the downsides of drinking too much. So maybe

you think about how you should know better by now, or you remind yourself of all the ways that drinking too much is not good for your health, or all the times that you have woken up the next day regretting your choices. We tend to really focus here, focus our attention on the consequences and the downsides. We are so accustomed to examining the downsides of drinking too much. At least that is what I did for the longest time and that's what I watch so many people do and what I want you to just start to explore is that perhaps you are examining your drinking from the wrong vantage point.

Because when we do this, we're looking backwards from hindsight. We're evaluating the decisions that we made afterwards from the vantage point of the person who is now suffering the consequences. Instead of understanding our decisions in the moment from the perspective of the person for whom the downsides were all off in the future. Because in the moment, part of you believes that having another drink is a good idea, even if you made a commitment not to, even if you told yourself that you would be good, even if you have plenty of evidence about why having more isn't serving you. In that moment when that desire for more bubbles up, part of you believes that it is a good idea. And it's not because you haven't learned your lesson. It's not because in that moment you're being irresponsible or stupid. It's because alcohol isn't all downside. It is a mix of benefits and costs.

So instead of continually reminding yourself of why you shouldn't have more, why it's bad for you to drink too much, why you're going to regret it, I want you to consider what would happen if you switch your vantage point and ask, okay, in that moment, that moment when that desire for more bubbles up, what does my brain believe the downsides of stopping will be? What will the downside of wanting another drink and saying no be? What will the downside of having that desire and not answering it be? I think this is a piece that so often goes unexamined the next day. Yet it is also the piece that can unlock so much understanding and help you understand not

only the decisions that you made, but your relationship with alcohol in a different light.

So I talk a lot about how your brain is a prediction-making machine. It's constantly making predictions about what is going to happen next. And this is a really useful feature of the brain. But we also have to understand how some of these predictions may not be helping us around trying to change our relationship with alcohol. When you understand this, you can start investigating the predictions your brain is making in the moment. And it may be happening at a totally unconscious level, but trust me, they are there. Predictions about why you shouldn't stop, why you should have more, not just about why another drink makes sense, but what your brain predicts will happen if you say no to the desire for more.

I think there are three areas that are especially useful to get curious about when you consider why you don't want to stop yourself from having more even if you promised yourself that you would. So let me walk you through them. The first one is simply feeling like you're not there yet. You don't yet feel the way you want to. One of the biggest appeals of alcohol is that it changes our feeling state. We seek out its rewarding effects and sometimes you might discover that after one or two drinks, you simply haven't reached the feeling state that you were hoping to get to. Your brain is essentially saying, wait a minute, I'm not there yet. I haven't got to the place that I wanted to go yet.

Now, this can happen with all the drink archetypes, but I see it show up a lot with the Escape, the Release, and the Remedy. Those three archetypes, I often see this happening that when you examine why in the moment you didn't want to stop, it's because you're like, yeah, because I'm not where I wanted to be. Stopping right now would mean giving up on the experience that I was anticipating.

Now, the second possibility is that you don't want the feeling that you have in this moment to end. So maybe you have arrived at the place that you

wanted to go. Right? You got the feeling that you were hoping for, but now you're worried about that feeling going away. And your brain predicts that stopping means that the feeling that you have right now will immediately start slipping away. So what do we do? We keep drinking in an attempt to keep the experience going. I have a whole episode number 477 on chasing the sweet spot. And you can go back to listen to that where I really go into that in depth. But the thing that I think is most important that I want you to understand from that discussion is that you cannot park yourself in a feeling state with alcohol and expect that you can just stay in that place indefinitely. The sweet spot is a moving target. It is really an attempt to balance alcohol's rewarding effects with its impairing effects.

So the way I used to understand this was I would have the goal of like, yeah, I want to feel buzzed, but I don't want to get sloppy. That's how I kind of understood chasing the sweet spot for myself. We have this idea, however, that once we have that good feeling, once we've captured it, that we can stay there, we can extend it, we can prolong it, we can keep it going. And frankly, that's just not how alcohol works. I really go into this quite a bit in episode 477, so I encourage you to check that one out. But what I want you to understand is that we cannot park ourselves in a feeling state and use alcohol to hold us there for as long as we want to because simply that's not how alcohol works in the body. So sometimes we're drinking more because we're literally afraid that the way that we feel right now is going to end. So we're trying to keep it going.

And the third possibility that I see come up a lot is that your prediction of the discomfort of stopping, right? The discomfort you will feel when you say no to that desire for more that has bubbled up inside of you, that prediction doesn't actually match the experience of actually not having more. In short, your brain predicts that it is going to be worse than it actually is. Now, I'm not saying that you won't feel a little restless or deprived or feeling like you're missing out. And I know that many of you have the experience of saying no and feeling like you're really, you know, you're gritting your teeth,

you're white knuckling it, you're using willpower, you're not enjoying yourself. So I know all of that is real. But I want you to also consider that part of what is happening here is this idea that somehow you could ever avoid feeling this way. Right? Somehow you could erase that sense of feeling disappointed that you're not having what you want. You could erase that experience altogether.

So when I'm working with people, I often reframe this as disappointment in life is coming either way. There is nothing we can do to prevent ourselves from sometimes feeling disappointed. It is part of the human experience. But what we can do is decide when we are going to experience that disappointment. So you can choose to feel disappointed in the moment because you have the desire to drink more, but you're not going to answer that desire. You're saying no to the desire. So you're not having another drink. You can feel disappointed in that moment. Or you can feel disappointed the next day because you drank more than you wanted to, because you broke your promise to yourself.

But do you see what I'm getting at here? Disappointment is coming either way. We fool ourselves into believing that somehow we can just avoid disappointment entirely. And to reframe this and understand that your brain's prediction, not only that the disappointment is going to feel worse, but also the prediction that somehow disappointment can be avoided entirely, that is part of the problem. I have learned again and again in my life, it is just so much more valuable to accept the short term disappointment that I sometimes feel from not having what I want when I want it, not just around alcohol, but around so many things in my life, rather than having the disappointment of feeling like I'm not keeping my promises to myself. The disappointment of I'm not showing up the way that I want to be, the disappointment in kind of who I am and how I'm showing up rather than the disappointment of, well, I didn't get to have the thing that I wanted.

And I'll give you a really simple example that's completely separate from drinking because I really do think this reframe for disappointment, it is so useful with your drinking, but it's frankly useful in all areas of your life. Right now, I am in the middle of reading a book that I am really enjoying. I'm really, really enjoying. I want to listen to it as much as I can. And frankly, I would much rather be reading that book right now than recording this podcast. But I'm willing to feel a little disappointed that I'm not letting myself read this morning. I'm willing to allow myself to feel that disappointment because I know that the disappointment I will feel if I keep procrastinating on recording this episode is going to be worse. Because then not only have I missed a deadline and now I'm scrambling to find time and it's having this domino effect that is, you know, impacting all of my other work, but it's like the disappointment of having told myself this is what I'm going to do this morning and then not following through on that promise.

So I think this reframe for disappointment can be so useful when it comes to your desire to have more. The disappointment of drinking too much, in my mind, always feels worse than the disappointment of not having another drink in the moment. And again, I see this really as like a skill. It's a muscle that you have to build and you have to practice and you have to put in the reps. This is something that you have to work and develop.

So yes, it's both a reframe of how you're thinking about the idea of disappointment and recognizing that there's a piece of you that may be believing that you could just somehow avoid it in life, but then you actually have to put in the reps and build the muscle of recognizing again and again that the disappointment of not having the thing that you want or not doing the thing that you want to do, that disappointment, yeah, it's there, but it's not nearly as bad as the disappointment that is coming later.

Right? We have to learn how to allow ourselves to want something without immediately acting on that desire. I think the mistake is believing, oh no, I'm just going to make all my desire go away, but all that does is set you up to

be afraid of your desire and to make your desire the enemy. Right? And learning how to do this is not about becoming more disciplined. It's not about focusing on all of the downsides. It's about understanding that there's no world in which we can ever avoid feeling disappointed sometimes, but we can choose when and where and the type of disappointment that we want to experience. And I think that is a really important skill, understanding why you want another drink and learning how to want it without having to have it. Those are two different skills and both of them are really important.

So when you find yourself asking, well, why is it so hard for me to stop drinking once I start? Notice what happens when you go to the typical explanations of, well, it's simply because alcohol impairs your judgment or maybe it's because there's just something wrong with you or something different about your brain. Notice how stuck you will feel with those explanations and what will happen instead when you stop looking back in hindsight from the place of I should know better, I should be more responsible, I shouldn't be so stupid. What happens instead when you get curious about, well, why in the moment does part of me not want to say no? Does part of me not want to stop even though I told myself that I would? What is my brain predicting another drink will do for me and what is it also predicting will happen if I say no, if I stop myself from having more?

This idea of the brain as a prediction making machine is something that I really have been exploring deeply in my work. I think it's very much connected to another idea that I talk about all the time, how your brain is a meaning-making machine. Your brain is constantly making predictions about what will happen if you drink, what will happen if you don't drink in certain situations, what will happen if you stop yourself from having more, but it's also attaching meaning to all of those decisions. It's attaching meaning to alcohol. This is really where the drink archetypes came from. The understanding that we unconsciously have learned to give alcohol so many different jobs in different situations and we attach so much meaning

to our decisions around alcohol beyond simply, well, I like the taste and I like the way it makes me feel and it's just what I do in this situation.

I am putting the finishing touches right now on something brand new that I am so excited to share with all of you early next year. It's called Alcohol Relearned and it's expanding on everything that I've been teaching with the drink archetypes to really help you understand what is actually happening when you drink, both to your conscious experience, to your body, what your brain is learning and not explaining this solely in terms of the harms and the risks of alcohol, but also looking at the benefits and how your body responds and how that can lead to drinking more the next day and in subsequent situations. And again, what your brain is learning from all of this. Really unpacking and helping you uncover how this unfolds specifically for you, rethinking all of the traditional conceptions around change and how change is possible and who is able to change and who's not, as well as going into the actual skills of relearning and retraining your brain.

I really see Alcohol Relearned as the precursor to the drink archetypes. And so no matter your unique set of archetypes, this I see is like the foundation that you need on which to build the change that you want to create. So I will be sharing more about what I am creating, but I will tell you a big part of this course is really helping you understand and unpack questions like these. Why can't I stop once I start? Why can't I do what I know is good for me? Why do I keep making the same mistake over and over and why does change feel so hard? Understanding all of this, answering these questions without making alcohol or your desire the enemy and without believing that something is wrong with you or turning you into the problem or believing that there's something fundamentally different about you or wrong with your brain.

So I am so excited. I'm going to be launching this early next year. If you want to be the first to know when enrollment opens, you can head over to

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RachelHart.com/interest. You can get on the list there. You will be the first to know. But in the meantime, I just want you to think differently about this question of why it's so hard to stop drinking once you have started. This is such a frustrating place to be in and I think it is frustrating not only because of the traditional answers that we give ourselves, but also because so often it doesn't make sense with what our drinking looks like and understanding that for many people, well, sometimes you are stopping and sometimes you do moderate yourself and why does it feel harder in certain situations than others? Really unpacking all of that, I think comes from switching the vantage point from which you're understanding this problem.

So the next time you're looking back at how much you drank and you're wondering, well, why did I go overboard? Why didn't I know when to say when? Instead of immediately going to, I should know better, I should have learned my lesson by now, I want you to see if instead you can get curious about what was happening for you in that moment.

Again, instead of focusing on all the downsides of drinking too much, what happens if you ask yourself, in that moment, when the desire was bubbling up inside of me for more, what did I believe the downsides of stopping would be? What was my brain predicting would happen if I had another drink and if I didn't have another drink? What felt difficult about wanting more without having more? Was I not yet where I wanted to be? Was I afraid the feeling might slip away? Was I trying to avoid feeling disappointed or restless or deprived or feeling like I was missing out? When the truth is, disappointments coming either way in life. Because knowing why you shouldn't have another drink is not the same as understanding how to change your relationship to your desire to have more.

All right, that's it for today. I will see you all next week and I am so, so, so excited for you guys to learn more about Alcohol Relearned.

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Something brand new is coming in 2027. Alcohol Relearned is everything you were never taught about drinking, desire, and how to make lasting change. Visit RachelHart.com/interest to be the first to know when enrollment opens.