

**Ep #125: Listener Q&A:
How to Handle Drinking & Insomnia**



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Rachel Hart

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You are listening to the *Take A Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, episode 125.

Welcome to the *Take A Break* podcast with Rachel Hart. If you are an alcoholic or an addict, this is not the show for you, but if you are someone who has a highly functioning life, doing very well, but just drinking a bit too much and wants to take a break, then welcome to the show. Let's get started.

Well hello everybody. We are going to do a listener Q&A today. That's where you send me in your questions and I answer them on the podcast. If you have a question for me, you can always send an email to podcast@rachelhart.com.

Today's question is this. "Do you have any advice on sleeping without having several drinks? I have trouble falling asleep. This in turn weakens my resolve not to drink." You know, I thought this was the perfect question to answer today because I actually woke up at 2:55 in the morning and I stayed awake until I headed to the gym at 5:30.

Now listen, I have talked on this podcast before that in the past, sometimes my problem was actually sleeping too much. Sometimes I found myself using sleep as a way to escape my life. Too much pain, too many problems, I just wanted to go unconscious.

Now, if you are someone out there that is struggling with falling asleep, this may sound amazing, but oversleeping, sleeping too much is a form of numbing. It is a form of trying to escape how you feel. And the problem is that when you wake up, all your problems are still there. You can never sleep enough to change your life. You have to be awake and conscious if you want to start changing your life.

So I have had this period in my life where I have engaged in oversleeping, but I have also struggled at times with insomnia. There are two times in my

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life where insomnia was a real problem for me, a regular problem. One was right before I decided to take a break from drinking in my early 30s. At that time, I committed that I was going to take a break from drinking and really figure out how to solve the problems that alcohol was solving for me.

So this meant learning how to relax on my own and not needing a drink to relax. Learning how to feel comfortable in social situations on my own and not turning to a drink. Not using it to deal with anxiety, not using it to feel confident before heading out, not using it to drown my sorrows, not using it to connect with people. This is what I was committed to doing.

But right before I decided to take that break, my sleep was totally screwed up from my drinking. I would wake up pretty regularly in the middle of the night and I would really struggle to get back to sleep. And when I woke up, I was really filled to the brim with anxiety, and it was a terrible, terrible pattern to be in.

Now, that all changed for me when I took a break from drinking. I'm going to talk to you a little bit later about why that is. But the other time that I struggled with insomnia was right before and right after having a baby. So right before, when I was in my last trimester, it was really difficult to get comfortable in bed so it was really difficult to fall asleep and stay asleep.

And then of course right after the baby was born, the baby needed to be nursed all the time, all throughout the night. And I would nurse him and that would put him right back to sleep, but often I would stay awake until his next feeding. And you would think I was so tired then, you'd think I'd be able to fall back asleep but I really couldn't.

But last night, last night when I woke up at 2:55 in the morning, it wasn't either of those things. It was just plain old garden variety insomnia. My husband was sound asleep, my 10-month-old was sound asleep. I, on the other hand was wide awake and I stayed that way. Because here's the thing; sometimes humans can't sleep because we're human and that's a really important piece of this.

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But here's what I want to talk to you about today. I want to talk to you first about the effects of alcohol on your sleep cycle because let me tell you, they are very profound effects and you should know about them. I want to also talk to you about what really makes not sleeping a problem, and I promise you, it's not what you think it is. And I also want to cover the two ways I see people most commonly use a drink to either help them fall asleep or to help them get back to sleep when they've woken up in the middle of the night.

And I just want to be clear right now, both of these are terrible habits to get into. You will only become more dependent on alcohol in these situations and your sleep will only get more screwed up because of alcohol. It really is a vicious cycle. Finally, we're going to talk about how to use the think-feel-act cycle to help you when you are lying awake in bed unable to fall asleep.

Understanding how to master this will really change everything. So let's start with the effects of alcohol on your sleep cycle. Alcohol is going to lead to a fitful night's sleep. It blocks REM sleep. That is the most restorative type of sleep in your sleep cycle, and when you have less REM sleep, you are likely to wake up feeling groggy and unfocused.

But it's more than just that. Alcohol is also a diuretic, which means it increases your need to go to the bathroom, which again, interrupts your normal sleep patterns. But also, because it is a diuretic, it encourages the body to lose extra fluid through sweat during the night. So guess what happens. You become dehydrated.

Now, you probably have had the experience. I know I have, of waking up in the middle of the night after a big night of drinking and it's just like you have cotton mouth. You're desperate for a glass of water. Another reason that you might be waking up. Alcohol is also a depressant. It causes your body to relax, and that's why some people get into the habit of using a drink to fall asleep.

Here's the problem. It's causing the muscles of your throat to relax, and that makes you more prone to snoring. And it's not just your partner's

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snoring that can wake you up. Your own snoring can wreak havoc on your ability to sleep and getting a good night's rest.

And then finally, alcohol just really disrupts your Circadian rhythm. It disrupts your sleep-wake cycle because it is affecting the normal production of sleep and wake hormones. So all together, there are a lot of negative effects that alcohol has on your sleep cycle, but just imagine for a second if you are already struggling with sleep.

Maybe you have poor sleep hygiene, maybe you're going through menopause, maybe you have sleep apnea, maybe you're feeling a lot of anxiety during the day. When you add alcohol to the mix, it's a little bit like pouring water on a grease fire. In the moment it seems like it should be helpful, but it's only going to make things worse.

One of the best things that happened for me now that I don't drink, my mornings are so different. It's not just my sleep that's different. My mornings are different. Instead of feeling like I have to pull myself out of bed, my husband really jokes that when I wake up, it's like someone flipped on a switch. I'm just awake. I'm not groggy, I'm not lethargic, I'm really ready to go.

And I love feeling this way in the morning, especially because all throughout college, all throughout my 20s, into my early 30s, waking up was a slog. I woke up and more often than not I felt uninspired, kind of blah, and many times just waking up with quite a bit of anxiety that I had no understanding was actually connected to my drinking.

But listen, I'm still human. I still have days when I feel tired or groggy, but I will tell you that now that I don't drink, it is way, way, way less than it used to be. Now, if you're using a drink or a couple, or more than a couple to fall asleep or to go back to sleep, you may have tried solving this problem by trying to improve your sleep hygiene.

And sleep hygiene is great, so that includes all sorts of things like going to bed at the same time, sleeping in a cold room, a dark room, limiting screen

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time a couple hours before you go to bed, not having electronics in the room, not having pets or kids in the room, using white noise machines, meditation apps.

And listen, all of these things are really good, but no amount of sleep hygiene is really going to make much of a difference if you are routinely disrupting your wake-sleep cycles with alcohol. It is like trying to put lipstick on a pig. You're making a bunch of cosmetic changes, but you are ignoring the true nature of the problem.

So that's how alcohol disrupts your sleep cycle, but I don't want to dive into that so much today as talking about what really makes not sleeping a problem. This is something that I guarantee you're probably overlooking because most people will say, "Well, the problem with not sleeping is that I didn't sleep, that I can't fall asleep. That's the problem."

And I want to talk to you about this from a different point of view because of course, yes, from a physiological point of view, your body needs sleep. It helps us repair and restore organs and muscles and our immune system and hormones. We need it for mental functioning. We need time for our brain to encode everything that it's learned during the day and to make memories.

But that's not why you think not sleeping is a problem. In that moment when you are lying awake, unable to fall asleep, you're not saying, "Uh-oh, my organs are being deprived, or I'm not probably encoding what I learned today into memories." That's not what you're saying. Not sleeping is only a problem when you don't like how you feel when you're awake. When you're lying there awake, when you do not enjoy your emotional state. That's when it becomes a problem.

Because if you like how you feel, that moment when you're lying in bed and your eyes are open and you're not sleeping, if you have a positive emotion, then there's no problem with being awake. If you are in bed awake, thinking about a trip that you can't wait to take, or someone that you can't wait to

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see, you are not thinking that there's a problem. You are enjoying being awake, even if you're tired.

Not sleeping only becomes a problem in that moment for you when you don't like how you feel. If you feel good in that moment when you're lying in bed, it's not a problem. If you feel bad, if you're having a lot of negative emotions, then it becomes a huge problem. That truly is the problem and that's where you need to focus.

And the good news is that's something that you actually can change because sleep is a circumstance. It is not something that you have immediate control over. Sleep is something like breathing. You can do things to improve it, you can do things to help it, but you cannot will yourself to stop breathing. Just like you can't will yourself to fall asleep.

Yes, there are many things that you can do to help make it more likely, but even if you have the perfect diet and even if you have perfect sleep hygiene, some days you're not going to be able to sleep perfectly because we aren't robots. We're humans. That's why I wasn't able to sleep last night, and that is really important. What you can change then is simple. How you feel when you are lying in bed awake instead of asleep.

And this might seem silly to you. You may be thinking, "Rachel, I just want to sleep. Come on." But being able to change how you feel when you're lying awake, being able to change how you think about the circumstance of being awake, that can change everything because if your thoughts in that moment are creating stress or anxiety or despair, it is going to make it harder for you to fall asleep and not easier.

We cannot guarantee it, but it definitely will not help matters. And this is where the think-feel-act cycle comes in. Because changing your thoughts about sleep cannot change the circumstance, but it can make you feel better in the moment. And I will tell you, this morning when I was lying awake in bed, I was wide awake but I wasn't feeling anxious and I wasn't annoyed about being awake.

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I wasn't feeling resentful that my husband was sound asleep and my baby was sound asleep. I wasn't worried about the lack of sleep that I was getting and how it was going to impact my day. I was just awake. And listen, would I have preferred to have fallen back asleep? Sure. But I promise you, the ability not to experience any of those negative emotions made my time awake so much better and so much easier.

So I want to run you through some of the most common thought problems that are really impacting how you feel when you're unable to sleep. The very first thought problem that I see with people is how they categorize themselves as a sleeper. Just ask yourself the question, do you believe that you are great at falling asleep or terrible falling asleep?

People say this all the time. Oh, I'm a terrible sleeper. Oh, I'm a great sleeper. Listen, if you believe you're a terrible sleeper, let's just ask yourself, how do you feel when you think that thought? Maybe anxious? Maybe a little bit annoyed? Maybe a little resentful? The question for you then is what do you do when you feel these emotions?

I will tell you, you're probably searching for evidence that yes indeed, sleep is something that you struggle with. You're probably ruminating over it. You might be feeling sorry for yourself a little bit. You might be thinking about how it's never going to get better, how you're stuck this way. It's not a particularly helpful cycle to be in.

And now, some of you may be thinking, well, I can't just lie to myself and claim that I'm an amazing sleeper. And I'll tell you, I never ever advocate for you to practice a thought that feels false. Not just because I don't think it's a good idea but because it won't work. If your brain doesn't believe it, it's not going to create a better feeling emotion for you.

But here's the thing; so often just going to a neutral phrasing of a thought can be better. So if you are constantly telling yourself that you're a terrible sleeper and you notice your brain thinking that a lot when you're unable to fall asleep, what if you just called yourself a sleeper? What if you took terrible out of it? I'm a human who sleeps.

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Every time you notice your brain wanting to judge what your sleep is like or how you specifically are as a sleeper, you can practice keeping it neural. I'm a person who sleeps. Sometimes I'm asleep, sometimes I'm awake. Listen, that thought alone can be hugely helpful because it takes so much judgment out of it and it's also believable because the truth is sometimes you do sleep. Maybe not right now, maybe not in that exact moment, but sometimes you do sleep.

The second obstacle that I see for people is what are you doing when you can't fall asleep. So this can be either at the very beginning of the night or maybe when you wake up in the middle of the night and you're trying to get back to sleep. What are you doing? What's preventing you from going to sleep?

Now, a lot of people will tell me, "Well, my mind is just kind of racing. I can't stop thinking about what happened today or what's going to happen tomorrow. I can't turn off my brain." And I've talked about this before on the podcast, how an unsupervised mind loves to hang out in what I call the negative past or the negative future, which is why we all need to learn how to supervise our own minds.

Because if left to its own devices, it's not heading towards a pretty place. So you can ask yourself, is there something that you are obsessing about? Because if you're in that negative past or that negative future, we have to figure out how to move you to a different place, and one way that you can do that is by separating out your thoughts, so these are all your judgments, your opinion, your story about what is happening from the circumstances. The facts of the situation.

So you separate out the neutral circumstances from the thoughts. Your story. Your opinion. What you're making those circumstances mean. Let's take an example. Maybe you have a presentation at work next week. That's a circumstance. Everyone can agree that that's a fact. But you might be thinking about it, it's going to be a disaster, I'm not prepared, I don't know what I'm doing. What if I make a fool of myself?

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That's the difference. Can you separate those two things out because just the act of doing this work, of separating your circumstances from your thoughts can be incredibly helpful because it can show you where you can start to practice thinking differently.

Clients will so often tell me that they will feel really overwhelmed by what is happening in your life. They're overwhelmed by their thoughts and they notice that that overwhelm feeling often comes right back to a thought, "I can't handle this" or, "I can't handle this situation." I have a client that I'm working with right now who recently started practicing a new thought, and that new thought is I am handling this.

So she went from I can't handle this, to I am handling this. And she noticed that every time her brain wanted to tell her you can't handle this, you can't handle this, she was stuck. She noticed that every time she told herself that she couldn't handle it, she was ignoring the fact that she was actually taking action. She was doing things. She felt overwhelmed but she was still getting to work.

So she felt negatively as she was taking the action, but it felt better for her to practice I am handling this versus I can't handle this. And it also felt true because she was actually doing something. She wasn't just stuck sitting on the couch.

You have to see if you can start identifying the thoughts creating your anxiety in the moment. that's why we do the work of separating out the circumstances from your thoughts. Once you do that, you can start to see if you can wiggle those thoughts, if you can come up with something that just feels slightly better. And what a small change from I can't handle this to I am handling this, but that made all of the difference.

Another obstacle that I see for people. What are you telling yourself in the moment when you are lying awake in bed? What are you telling yourself about what not being able to sleep right now is going to mean for you tomorrow? I've done this myself. I used to do this a lot. I would tell myself,

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oh my god, I have to fall asleep. If I don't, I'm just not going to be able to function tomorrow.

Now, this piece I find particularly fascinating because so much of our belief system about what is needed in order to function properly revolves around this idea that in order to do that, we have to have eight hours of sleep. Eight hours of uninterrupted sleep. That equals a good night's sleep.

Now, one way I like to think about this is eight is an average, which means some days you're going to get more, and some days you're going to get less. And I will tell you that some nights when I cannot fall back to sleep, or I can't get to sleep, I'm just practicing the thought, "Oh, this is one of those nights when I get less sleep." Eight hours is an average. Sometimes you get more, sometimes you get less, and this is one of those days or nights when I just get less sleep.

So it immediately feels like it's not such a big deal. But the other piece that I think is really fascinating that I like to play with as well is this idea that uninterrupted sleep, eight hours of uninterrupted sleep was not always the norm. Up until recent history, humans were practicing something called biphasic sleep, which meant that they slept in four-hour stretches.

So humans would go to bed when it was dark, they would sleep on average for about four hours, they would wake up then and they would have a period of awake time in the middle of the night, and they would actually use it. They would use it for an activity and then they would go back to sleep again. They weren't sleeping in eight-hour chunks.

Scientists first started being clued into this when they were finding references in literature to something called a first sleep and a second sleep. But then they also discovered that when you deprived people of artificial light, after a while, those people would naturally return to the split sleep schedule.

We lost biphasic sleep when electricity was introduced and all of a sudden, we were illuminating the night. So we were staying up later. So I also think

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this is just a really interesting thing to think about, that humans were not necessarily built to get eight hours of uninterrupted sleep. Yes, that is our modern expectation. But when I think about that when I'm lying awake in the middle of the night, all of a sudden it doesn't seem like there's such a problem.

Oh, humans used to do this for most of human history. They would have four hours of sleep and then they'd wake up in the middle of the night and they'd use that time for an activity, then they'd go back to sleep. Sometimes just that, just reframing, hey, maybe this isn't a problem, maybe this is actually even normal can help a lot too.

But I know some of you are probably hung up on this thought I can't afford to not sleep right now, I can't afford to be tired tomorrow, I've got so much to do. And I think it's really helpful to really ask your brain okay, what is going to happen? Because your brain is catastrophizing. It is going to that worst-case scenario. So let's just think about it.

What really is going to happen? Now, on the face of it, my brain just wants to say you're not going to be able to get any work done. You're going to be too tired to work. I will tell you this; after much experience of having nights where I'm not able to sleep, I don't get a good night's sleep, I feel tired the next day and life happens, work still happens, I still have to show up, you know what? I get the work done.

I'll tell you right now, I have a little bit of that kind of dull headache that comes for me when I don't get a good night's sleep right in the front of my forehead. And I've had it for about an hour and a half, and I know why I have it. But that's okay because sometimes you have headaches when you show up to work.

The problem is not the headache. The problem is when you freak out in advance about the headache and then freak out while you have the headache, or feel pissed off about having the headache, or create anxiety because you're telling yourself that the headache will never go away.

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The truth is I have a headache. I did not get as much sleep as I normally do, and I still have enough energy to get through the day. Still had enough energy to go to the gym and coach my clients and record a podcast and make meals for my family and handle the baby duties. I can still do it. I was just a little more tired than normal while I was doing it.

But in that moment, when you are telling yourself I can't afford to be tired tomorrow, I've got too much to do, those thoughts are going to create anxiety for you and that anxiety, I promise is not going to help you fall asleep. You could instead be reminding yourself that even if you are lying awake, if you're lying awake in bed, your body is resting. That is rest, and that rest is going to help you tomorrow.

You could be reminding yourself of that. Or, you know what, sometimes you show up to your day, to work, to life, to your responsibilities for you family or other people and you're tired, and you're still able to get stuff done. Now, I always think it's really important to also focus on - especially a night where you did not get the kind of sleep that you wanted to focus on what you actually tell yourself the next day.

Because what I did for a really long time is just tell myself I'm so tired, I'm so tired, I'm so tired, I'm so tired, and it felt like I was just relaying the news. It felt like I was just explaining what was happening. It didn't feel like an optional thought. But you know what? When I told myself over and over again and when I fixated on how tired I was, I noticed that I was kind of pissed off. I was kind of annoyed. I was a little resentful.

I thought that being tired was a problem. But here's the thing; I'm human, you're human. Sometimes we are going to be tired. Sometimes we have more energy and sometimes we have less. And when we tell ourselves that the times when we have less energy is a problem, that actually creates a second layer problem because we have less physical energy but now we have an emotional problem because now we feel annoyed or resentful or angry on top of it. That is not helping matters.

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Being tired sometimes is not something to freak out about. It's not a problem. But it will become a problem when you layer negative emotion on top of physical exhaustion. Truly experiencing what physical exhaustion feels like in your body without all the thought and emotional drama is so much easier.

So, the final thing that I just want to say is really to think about all the ways that we make feeling physically tired or being awake at night so much worse with our thoughts. Alcohol is not going to help you in the long run. It will only make you more dependent and it will only wreak havoc on your sleep cycle. It really creates a vicious cycle.

But there is so much that you can do just by paying attention to the thoughts that you are having when you are awake and the next day, for that matter when you're feeling tired because most likely, you are unknowingly compounding physical exhaustion with annoyance, anxiety, stress, resentment, and anger. And guess what happens when we feel a lot of negative emotion?

We look for relief. And what form does that relief often come in? A drink, which will disrupt your sleep and disrupt your ability to cope with how you feel. You're taking something that is normal, which is lying awake, not always being able to fall asleep when you want to, feeling tired. You're taking these normal things and your thoughts are actually turning it into something that is negative, and that's where you can change, even to make it neutral.

You don't have to go positive. You don't have to say I love this, but even just going neutral can create so much relief for you. So here are some thoughts for you to practice. I am a sleeper. Sometimes I sleep. Sometimes I'm awake in the middle of the night and that's okay. I am handling this. My body is resting right now even if I'm not asleep. I'm tired right now and that's not a problem. I got the exact amount of sleep I was supposed to get last night.

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All of the work in the world, all of this work, all of this sleep hygiene, I promise you this; it's not going to help if you keep using a drink to try to solve the problem of your sleep because using a drink is just making it worse. But there is so much that you can do just by watching your brain at work when you are awake, lying in bed. That is a fantastic time to start practicing awareness and practicing using the think-feel-act cycle to help yourself feel better.

Alright, thank you for your questions. Again, you can send them in to podcast@rachelhart.com. That's it for today. See you guys next week.

Hey guys, if you're finding this podcast helpful, and I really hope you are, I would love if you would head on over to iTunes and leave a review. And as a special thank you, I've updated and expanded my free urge meditation giveaway. I've created two audio meditations plus a brand-new workbook that will teach you a different way to respond to the urge to drink.

The meditations are super simple. All it takes is five minutes and a pair of headphones, and each one now comes with a follow up exercise in the workbook to help you dig deeper and really retrain your brain when it comes to the habit of drinking. So after you leave a review on iTunes, all you need to do is head on over to rachelhart.com/urge, input your information, and I'll make sure you get a copy of both meditations plus the workbook in your inbox.

Thanks for listening to this episode of *Take A Break from Drinking*. If you like what was offered in today's show and want more, please come over to www.rachelhart.com where you can sign up for weekly updates to learn more about the tools that will help you take a break.