

Ep #51: How to Change Your Relationship with Alcohol



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kristi Angevine

[Habits On Purpose](#) with Kristi Angevine

Ep #51: How to Change Your Relationship with Alcohol

Welcome to Episode #51. Listen in to this episode to learn about the habit of drinking and overdrinking. And, the reasons you might find yourself having a tricky relationship with alcohol. Quick hint, if you do have a tricky relationship with drinking, it's not because there's something inherently wrong with you.

And if alcohol isn't a part of your life, this episode is still applicable to just about any other substance or behavior that you might want to change. Think of things like; the New York Times online games, scrolling, sugar, Candy Crush, television, excess work, excess exercise, shopping for things you don't need. As you listen, just substitute in your behavior of choice. Enjoy.

Welcome to *Habits On Purpose*, a podcast for high-achieving women who want to create lifelong habits that give more than they take. You'll get practical strategies for mindset shifts that will help you finally understand the root causes of why you think, feel, and act as you do. And now, here's your host, Physician and Master Certified Life Coach, Kristi Angevine.

Hello, hello, everyone. I am still absorbing how cool it is that I have almost a year of podcasting under my belt. When I started the podcast, I had a tremendous amount of self-doubt, to say the least. And so much perfectionism showed up, really loudly.

Since I have parts of me that have a tendency to minimize or dismiss, I am taking very seriously the task of looking back and savoring all the personal growth that was required of me to do this podcast every week for a year.

So I want to take a minute now to thank you for listening. Thank you for listening in every week. Thank you for sharing it with your friends. Thank you for writing in with your questions. And thank you so much for writing reviews and doing ratings. It just means so much to me.

In this vein, I would love your help to celebrate the milestone of one year of podcasting. My goal is to get the podcast more ratings and reviews, so that it can get into the ears of people who need it. To do that, I need your help.

Ep #51: How to Change Your Relationship with Alcohol

To make it worth your while, I'm going to do another giveaway of one of the lovely Day Designer planners.

So, the way that you can enter to win, is go to iTunes and leave a rating and review. Then, go to [HabitsOnPurpose.com/review](https://www.habitsonpurpose.com/review) and just let me know that you left a review. On that form, you'll enter your name, your email address, and the title of your review. And then, in a few weeks, we'll draw the winner, and we'll announce who gets the Day Designer planner. It will be sent right to your home.

I use this planner because it's really simple. I know that there's no particular planner that's going to change your life. But if you're somebody who likes to have a really streamlined way to look at a month, or one day at a time, or if you just know somebody that you want to gift this planner to, then please enter, because you'll really love it. If you could help me grow the reach of the podcast, that would be so great.

So, let's dive into today's topic, the habit of drinking and overdrinking. When I first started out coaching, I focused on helping physicians change their relationship with alcohol. I was drawn to this particular habit change work because I personally had experienced having a habit of using alcohol to wind down.

It was an insidious habit that developed over time. There was never any rock-bottom experience. But when I looked at this habit, I realized that I wanted to want alcohol less. I wanted to just take it or leave it, and I realized that it was occupying more of my mental and emotional space than I wanted it to.

I did my own work on this habit. And then, I found it so gratifying to help others examine and deliberately design a relationship with alcohol that served them well. As I did this work with my clients, it became abundantly clear that the problem they presented with was their drinking.

But the real issue was not actually the alcohol itself. The more core issue was always about a habit that developed as a solution to some problem.

Ep #51: How to Change Your Relationship with Alcohol

And, that habit just so happened to be alcohol. Thus, my fascination with habits in general, was born.

Now, if you've listened to me for a while, you know that I view habits as the result of habituated ways of thinking, and habituated ways of feeling, that drive habitual actions. I also see, even the most deeply ingrained habits as more malleable than we realize.

When it comes to discussing the habit of drinking, there can be a lot of moral charge. One of the dominant narratives around drinking is the disease model. And this says, that if you overdrink you have a disease, and you're broken, and you have an inherent problem that will never resolve.

This model, or way of looking at alcohol and its consumption, can be very useful for some people. But for many other people, it can incite shame and hiding that outweighs the beneficial aspects of this paradigm.

So, all this to say, if you have a habit of drinking, or you listen to this episode and you notice that your relationship with alcohol feels a little bit complicated, there's nothing wrong with you. This recognition of a pattern it's not a sign of a moral failing. A habit of drinking is equivalent to any other habit you have; be it one that you like or one that you don't like.

Like any habit, it's simply a product of repeated ways of thinking and feeling and acting. So, that's my plug for eliminating any sheepishness or shame surrounding the habit of drinking.

Now, this topic is very complex, and it requires some explicit disclaimers and serious caveats. Number one, I'm not an addiction expert, or an alcohol abuse counselor.

Number two, if you think you have a problematic relationship with alcohol, please talk to your healthcare provider or therapist. In the show notes, we will link to resources that can be of service to you, if you do want professional medical help. We will also link to other drinking resources, in terms of podcasts and books, that you might really love for educating

Ep #51: How to Change Your Relationship with Alcohol

yourself on the neuroscience of drinking, as well as the habit of drinking itself.

Number three, this episode is not meant as a diagnostic tool, or as a treatment for alcohol use disorder, binge drinking, or addiction. So, let me just take a minute and define what alcohol use disorder is.

Alcohol Use Disorder is described as such: It's the impaired ability to stop drinking, despite social, occupational, or health consequences. It encompasses the conditions that some people refer to as; alcohol abuse, alcohol dependence, alcohol addiction, and the colloquial term "alcoholism." If this describes you, please connect with your healthcare provider or therapist.

Now, on the other side of the spectrum, this episode is not meant to demonize alcohol. In my view, there's no moral superiority to teetotaling drinking. It is just like any other behavior; it is neutral until we form an opinion about it.

I want to say a few things about some phrases you may have heard. And these phrases are, "gray area drinking" and "middle lane drinking." These phrases describe various relationships with alcohol, where essentially, you don't meet medical alcohol use disorder criteria, but you might find yourself quietly worrying about your desire for a drink. You can stop, but it might be a little bit hard to stay stopped.

Jolene Park is the founder of the Gray Area Drinkers Resource Hub. She says, gray area drinkers ricochet between ignoring that still, small voice inside telling them to stop drinking, and deciding that they're overthinking, and they just need to "live a little."

A gray area drinker might feel like they need it to relax or wind down to socialize, as opposed to feeling like they can just take it or leave it. In this category of drinking, it might not be uncommon to loosely plan to go out and have a drink or two, but then end up having five or six. There's no rock-bottom, so to speak.

Ep #51: How to Change Your Relationship with Alcohol

And no one would look at you and think that you're a problem drinker, but deep down, you sense your relationship with alcohol is a little bit more complicated than just being able to take it or leave it. So, if you've heard these phrases and been curious about them, that's what they mean. And if this is you, welcome, you are in good company.

Today's episode is an exploration of these more subtle ways that a tricky relationship with alcohol might show up. I'm going to introduce you to the topic of overdrinking and buffering. And by the end of this episode, you'll know if you have any buffering habits you want to examine. And, you'll understand exactly how drinking is a learned solution. So, let's get started.

A habit worth examining, and a habit worth questioning, is one that has a consequence you don't like. It's one that feels like it has a life of its own, and one that you've perhaps struggled to change. It could also be a behavior that you do, in order to solve for something, or to escape or avoid something.

Today, I'm talking specifically about the habit of drinking and the habit of overdrinking. But even if you don't have a habit related to alcohol, you might have another habit with the same features. Maybe, it's food. Maybe, it's scrolling. Maybe it's shopping for things you don't need. Working in a way that feels compulsive. Maybe, it's playing Candy Crush on your phone.

Maybe this habit is hard to change, and helps you avoid dealing with something else. And if that's the case, just substitute in your habit every time I say alcohol. Alright?

First of all, how do we define normal drinking, habituated drinking, or overdrinking? There are a variety of organizations that have different guidelines for how many drinks, per the size man or the size woman, qualifies as a "healthy" and not excessive amount. You're welcome to go look those up if that guidance is useful to you.

While these guidelines have their role, there are limitations to using them. For example, you might be a female who drinks well under the guidelines,

Ep #51: How to Change Your Relationship with Alcohol

who does not have any alcohol dependence, and yet, you know your relationship to drinking feels a little bit tricky. You know you want it, just a little bit more than you want to want it.

With that said, I'm going to invite you to just embrace the idea that you probably already know, if you have a habit of drinking that's a habit, and not simply a clean choice. You probably know if you are overdrinking in a way that doesn't feel good to you. I find that most people very quickly know if their relationship with alcohol feels good or does not feel good.

But if you're not sure, you can answer these questions and get some clarity really quickly. The first question is: Do I wish I wanted it less? Second question: When I drink, am I doing it to fix or escape something? In other words, am I doing it to tolerate something that's otherwise not as fun? Am I drinking to move away from something that's less pleasant, to something that feels more pleasant?

The third question: Could I take it or leave it? And, to make this more specific: Does a dry wedding make you want to guarantee that you can find alcohol, and sneak a flask in? Do you get antsy if there's no wine or beer in the fridge just in case you might want it? Can you take it or leave it?

Now, whether you drink every so often or you drink regularly, if it's not solving for anything, and you could just take it or leave it. If it feels like it's pure pleasure, separate from any escape, it's most likely a non-issue for you. If, however, the questions I mentioned make you scratch your head and wonder, could there be a habit worth looking at here? Perfect.

So, let's define the term buffering. Buffering comes from the coaching world. And when you hear buffering, you might think of the thing that your music app does when it's trying to load a song and it's taking forever, and it says buffering.

But the way we're using the term "buffering" here, is totally different. To buffer, means to lessen or soften the impact of. Buffering, as I'm using it

Ep #51: How to Change Your Relationship with Alcohol

here, refers to using something external to yourself, to change your internal experience.

Examples of buffering are: You open your phone to check your email, even though you just checked it five minutes ago. But you do it so you can feel less anxious in a social situation. Drinking, in order to feel less awkward at a meet-and-greet. Gobbling down hors d'oeuvres when you're not even hungry, because you just put your foot in your mouth in front of your boss. Buying things online that you don't need, to help stop ruminating about a stressful situation.

Now, you can buffer with any activity. You can buffer with your phone, with exercise, with work, with shopping, with online games, with gambling, with television, with sleep, with food, with recreational drugs. And of course, with alcohol. You can even buffer with things like learning, external validation, and personal development programs.

So, now that you know what the concept of buffering is, what are the root causes that you might have with the habit of buffering, drinking, or overdrinking? Again, let me be clear, this is not a neuroscience lecture or a deep dive into the mental emotional processes involved in addiction.

But in general, habits related to drinking occur because of a few reasons. To use Internal Family Systems language... Which, if you don't know what Internal Family Systems is, you can go listen to episode 49. Where I give you an overview of that paradigm, that describes one way of how the mind works.

But to use Internal Family Systems language, in some circumstances there's a part of us that wants to feel something, or stop feeling something else. There's something about our experience, that a part of a sees alcohol as capable of solving. And when this part presents, we feel the desire to drink.

In cognitive behavioral terms, the habit of drinking occurs simply because we've developed a pattern of thinking and feeling that leads to habitually

Ep #51: How to Change Your Relationship with Alcohol

reaching for a drink. It's in this way, that the habit of drinking or overdrinking is a learned solution. It's a solution where we can alter how we feel. It's a solution that solves for a problem that precedes the desire to drink.

And, all of this arises from how we're thinking. So, think about it for a minute. If you learn how to fix something, or you learn how to make something better or to feel better, that's really resourceful. There may be consequences you don't like, but it's a really creative, resourceful behavior.

In this way, buffering in general, and habit of drinking specifically, is a really creative, resourceful approach to solving for a problem. So, when it comes to examining a habit of buffering, specifically drinking, here's how I like to look at it.

If it's a solution, what's the problem or issue that it solves for? When you know what precedes the desire to drink, then you can be clear on why you have the habit. And once you clarify this, then you can do the work to explore the issue.

So, what might a drink solve for? Let's go through a couple of scenarios. And as you listen, just reflect on your own lived experience with what alcohol might be solving for you.

Say you're at a work meeting and you don't really know very many people there. Your idea of a fun time is not hanging out at a work meeting. But it's, rather, hanging out with close friends where you can connect. Or, just being by yourself, curling up with a good book or a movie, and just having solitude.

In this larger gathering, social awkwardness and self-consciousness are more your jam. So, having a drink is a solution, in that it quiets the parts of you that might say things like; gosh, other people know how to do small talk, not me.

It gives you something to do with your hands. It gives you something to sip when you feel restless or anxious or bored. And then, the initial pleasure

Ep #51: How to Change Your Relationship with Alcohol

from the alcohol itself, it's like salve to a burn. Because it quiets the inner mean girl or inner mean guy. It quiets the self-criticism and the compare-and-despair.

Or, say you come home from work. You had an okay day, but it was really busy. And, you didn't finish all that you wanted to. Somebody actually made a complaint about you, and you can't stop thinking about the person who said it. And, you just really want to break.

On your way home, you're just imagining how you can walk in the door and have a long exhale, and just have a moment to recalibrate. And then reality hits, because you walk in the door and within minutes your entire family is talking to you, and asking you questions, and wanting a hug, and asking for solutions to things.

Before five minutes can go by, a part of you is instantly irritated. You wish you could just have some peace and quiet. But you don't really want to be irritated with your family; you love these people. You want to be able to ask about their day, and be really present with their answer.

So, to the rescue comes the desire for a drink, and it sounds like; I just need to wind down. I just need to shut my brain off for the day. It'll just take a minute.

And, it works temporarily. It gives you the physiologic reward of the alcohol itself. Like a transient anesthetic, it numbs the feelings you came home with. It quiets the thoughts that you came home with. And, it helps you tap into an entirely different set of thoughts and feelings.

Or, how about this one. Say you spent the last few days on call. You had a really busy call shift; you were doing lots of admissions, lots of operating. You didn't sleep very much. You were super productive, And frankly, spent the bulk of your days nose to the grindstone; not taking much time to eat, drink, or rest.

You got through the intensity of this work. You're looking forward to a drink when you get home. And when you do get home, a part of you thinks, "I

Ep #51: How to Change Your Relationship with Alcohol

deserve this. I cannot wait. After all the work I've done, it is time to relax." And while you're sipping, you have thoughts like, "This tastes so great. It's just so relaxing. Oh, come on, one more won't hurt. It'll be totally fine." Before you know it, one glass turns into the whole bottle.

So, alcohol can be a solution in many, many ways. Here's some more: If you spend your whole day listening to inner criticisms, a drink can be respite. When irritability and overwhelm are your go-to emotions, having a drink can quiet those emotions. It can take the edge off and soften them.

If you're not having fun at a party and you feel restless and anxious and bored, a drink temporarily solves for that. If your friends all drink or your partner drinks, drinking may be part of your shared, common experience. And it may not be clear what the habit of drinking with them solves for.

But you'll find out really quickly, if it's solving for something or not, just by considering, what it would be like for you to have a date night or a night out with your friends, and not drink. If you have tasks that you experience as unpleasant; chores at home, packing, cleaning, folding laundry, getting your kids to bed. And you're already sapped from a long day, alcohol might solve for the reluctance and disinterest. And the case of what I call, "the I don't wannas."

See how in each scenario there's an issue that precedes the drinking? An issue that precedes the desire for a drink? Preceding the drink is a problem, in terms of a situation, a way of thinking, or an emotion that the alcohol can fix, at least on the surface.

My invitation to you is as follows: If you sense that alcohol use has become a habit, a less than intentional way of responding to the world. Or, if you've identified other are behaviors that fall into the category of buffering, start considering what the buffering behavior is solving for? Are you reaching for a drink out of boredom or restlessness?

Is it because you're feeling unsure what to say, and worrying how others will perceive you? Is it a desire to wind down from a highly stressful day? Is

Ep #51: How to Change Your Relationship with Alcohol

Is there a way to turn off relentless chatter so you can be more present? Is it a reward that helps you tolerate how you spend your working hours? Does it make something that's really boring much more fun?

Does it feel like it solves for disconnection? Does it squelch anger and resent when you're visiting your relatives? What does your habit solve for? Knowing this raises your awareness for the real reasons that drive you to habitually drink or to buffer, with any behavior. Then, once you know what the alcohol solves for, then you can start the process of being more deliberate about your drinking.

So, if you found this topic useful or you have any questions, you can email me at hello@habitsonpurpose.com. In the show notes, we are going to list some resources, if you listen to this topic and realize that your relationship with alcohol feels more serious than just a light habit to explore. So, we will have resources for you there, that are, books, podcasts, and professional resources. So, please don't hesitate to take a look at that.

And if you loved what you heard or how I described this topic, could you go to iTunes and leave the podcast a review? It would mean so much to me to have your help. To get the podcast into the ears of people who could really use this information presented here, in order to feel better and start living more intentionally.

Remember, if you leave a review, you can be entered into a drawing for a Day Designer planner that will be given away in a few weeks' time. To enter, all you have to do is leave me an honest review on iTunes. And then, let me know that you did so, by going to HabitsOnPurpose.com/review. When you go there, you'll enter your name, your email address, and the title of your review.

And then, when we announce the winner, we'll reach out and contact you. So many thanks. I'll see you in the next episode.

If you want to learn more about how to better understand your patterns, stop feeling reactionary, and get back into the proverbial driver's seat with

Ep #51: How to Change Your Relationship with Alcohol

your habits, you'll want to join my email list. Which, you can find linked in the show notes, or if you go to HabitsOnPurpose.com, you'll find it right there.

Thanks for listening to *Habits On Purpose*. If you want more information on Kristi Angevine or the resources from the podcast, visit HabitsOnPurpose.com Tune in next week for another episode.