

Ep #15: There Is No Wagon



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RachelHart

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You are listening to the *Take a Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, episode 15. Welcome to the *Take a Break* podcast with Rachel Hart. If you're 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.

Hello everybody, how are you doing? What is it like outside in your world right now? I will tell you that I woke up this morning to foghorns that were singing and stepped outside and San Francisco is just enveloped in fog, you cannot even see the Golden Gate Bridge, but I am learning slowly and surely to appreciate the fog and appreciate the foghorns.

So I've also been hearing from so many of you who are listening to the podcast and I really, really enjoy your emails, so keep sending them my way. You've also been sending in questions for me so I thought that on today's episode, I would devote the topic to one of the questions that I received.

So here's what one of my listeners wrote in to me, "Rachel, I've always struggled with my drinking and feeling like I might like booze a bit too much. My hangovers are getting worse as I get older and I'm at a point where I'm just so sick of how I feel. I'm really ready to feel better. I've been listening to your podcast and they've really helped me start to understand my drinking in a new way, especially thinking about it as habit that I can learn to change. But there's one place that I feel stuck. I'll get some steam going and I'll do really well not drinking for a couple weeks and then I just fall off the wagon and I don't know what happened. I seem to keep repeating this pattern over and over and I don't know how to get back on track. Help."

So how many of you out there can relate to what this listener wrote about? The idea that one day you were on the wagon, you were doing great, you felt really good and then suddenly you fell off and you have no

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idea what happened. I think that the really fascinating this is this concept of being on the wagon or falling off the wagon is so widespread that it no longer applies just to drinking. I'll hear people talk about being on the wagon or falling off the wagon when they're trying to kick any habit, but especially when people are talking about food and dieting.

So today, I want to answer this question of why we fall off the wagon, but in order to do this, you need to understand the two really simple reasons why you drink in the first place and how they're actually at odds with the concept of being on or off the wagon. So that's going to be today's topic.

Alright, first let me back up and let's just look at the idiom of on the wagon. I don't know about you but it kind of always confused me and for a long time I could not keep straight what on the wagon versus off the wagon meant. So here's the deal: to be on the wagon means that you are refraining from drinking or any habit, so when you fall off the wagon, that means you've taken up drinking or any habit again, after a period of abstinence.

And for those of you who are curious, because I'm always curious about things like this, why do we even have this idiom in the first place? I did a little research on this and I found that the first time we started talking about being on the wagon was actually in the 1890s, during the height of the temperance movement in the United States. Now, the temperance movement itself, it's a little bit of a misnomer because it did start out as a movement in the US, it was advocating for moderation around alcohol. It started out in connection with religious revivals that were taking place in the early 1800s but by the time you get to the 1890s, it ends up a pretty radical movement that is no longer just calling for moderation, it's actually calling for complete abstinence and prohibition of alcohol, and so much so that they wanted the government to intervene and that was a big part of the work of the temperance movement and other similar movements like it, like the Anti-Saloon League, this idea of asking politicians to actually intervene and prohibit alcohol.

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Anyway, so how is this connected to the idiom of on the wagon? So adherence at the time who gave up drinking, would refer to themselves as being on the water wagon, so that makes a lot more sense, right? When water is part of the idiom; but what they were referring to is these water wagons or these water carts that would hose down dusty streets in the city. So you can imagine that the water in the water wagons was water for sanitation purposes, for cleaning a street, not fit for drinking. And so when you were saying that you were on the water wagon, it was suggesting how committed you were to not drinking alcohol. So the idea being that you would rather drink the water from a water wagon, water that's not really even fit for drinking, than have booze.

And over time, we lost the idea of the water wagon portion, so it just became on the wagon, which was the first iteration of the idiom, but then people started talking about falling off the wagon, so that's where it comes from. And I'll tell you that I hear from so many people this idea of well, I just fell off the wagon, and when you think about it and you pay attention to the statement, it's such a passive statement: this idea of just falling off.

So think about it, both being on the wagon and falling off the wagon, it's like your commitment to take a break or not to drink in the first place is being carried along by some force outside of you, right? So if you think about it, if you sit down on a wagon, you're not doing any of the work, right? The horse is doing the work, the wheels are doing the work. You're just along for the ride. So it's a very passive way to talk about your commitment, but it's also a very passive way to talk about when you are no longer committed, when you decide to drink again or to start any habit again.

So this idea of well, I just fell off the wagon, I don't know what happened - so it's like you were riding along on the wagon and your commitment was being pulled, it was being carried by some other force, not by you; you were just along for the ride, and then all of a sudden you hit a bump in the road and you're thrown off because you know, wagons don't have seatbelts and there goes your commitment. So you end up being subjected to the bumps in the road or the shakings of the wagon and that

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jostles you off, rather than the idea of you making a choice to get off the wagon and to start whatever habit it is again.

So I just want to start by pointing out to you how passive both being on the wagon and being off the wagon are, when you really think about it, and that's in part why I don't really like the phrase so much because the more I came to understand it, the more I understood that it's really devoid of choice or decision making.

So it's this idea of things in your environment that are happening to you that you are being subject to, that are either carrying you forward in the goal that you want or jostling you off, right? There's not a lot of activity in terms of your own choices, your own decisions that you make.

So now, remember I said how this is at odds with the two simple reasons why you drink, and there are really only two reasons and neither of them has to do with being subjected to your environment around you or being totally passive or being carried along for a ride or being jostled off.

So, when you decide to drink, it is for one of two reasons. The first is you make the decision to drink proactively. You decide ahead of time. You use your prefrontal cortex to plan and decide that you are going to drink; absent feeling any urges, absent any desire, it is a planned decision.

And the second way that people drink is pretty much the opposite. You are still making a decision to drink but you are drinking reactively instead of proactively. So instead of planning a decision, instead of making a considered choice, you are responding in the moment, to an urge to desire and drinking from that place, drinking from a place of being reactive.

And that's not how a lot of us think about it, right? When we say the statement, I just fell off the wagon and I don't know what happened, we're not thinking about making a decision. We're thinking about something happening to us rather than us deciding to do something.

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But here's the thing, either you are making the decision to drink as part of a conscious planned choice, or you are making the decision in response to an urge that is driven by a habit. But either way, you are making a decision.

Now, people will say to me, well, if it's part of a habit, then it's outside of my control, I wasn't aware of it, it just happened, I can't control it, and I want to tell you this: this is the biggest fallacy. The idea that if it is a habit it is outside of your control, if it is a habit, then it just happens, you play no role in it. This really is a fallacy. I will tell you, you might be unaware of the thinking that is creating your desire and driving your habit, you might be unaware of the emotions that you're trying to cover up with a drink, you might be unaware of how the habit cycle even works, but here's the thing: you can always become aware, always.

The option of awareness is always available to you. That is what makes the human brain so powerful. As humans, we can think about our thinking, we can think about ourselves, we can think about our habits, even when they feel unconscious. Our habits are not locked away from us and they are not locked away from our understanding. You may feel like at this moment that you don't understand what is driving your habit, that you don't understand what's behind it, that you can't pinpoint what's going on, but that's just because you have not decided to direct energy to understanding the habits and to bringing awareness to your thinking.

Now, again, you might say, well I've really tried to understand why I drink more than my friends or why I drink more than other people. So I'm not suggesting that you haven't thought a lot about what is going on, maybe that you haven't journaled a lot or spent a lot of time beating yourself up, because that's how usually most people, when they spend time thinking about it, they spend time thinking about, okay, what's wrong with me? Why is this happening? Why can't I be like this other person? So it's not thinking that's coming from a place of observation, it's usually thinking that's coming from a place of let me beat myself up.

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But most people have not spent a lot of time really paying attention to bringing awareness to how their desire is created and what fuels it, and even understanding that their desire is in part created by what they're thinking. Most of us just think, our desire is just created by alcohol, right? End of story. So obviously it's just alcohol creating my desire, there's nothing really to think about or to be aware about.

So when I'm explaining to people the idea that just because you have a habit it doesn't mean that it's outside of your control, just because you're not aware of how it's working doesn't mean that you can't get awareness, I like to take an example that's actually outside of the world of drinking because I think sometimes that's so fraught for so many people that it's easier to understand when we look at different kinds of habits.

So in my late twenties, I moved from Crown Heights in Brooklyn to the Upper West Side in Manhattan. I lived in New York City for a long time, I've lived in a lot of different places but I went from this neighborhood in Crown Heights to this neighborhood on the Upper West Side. Now, if you know anything about the geography of New York City, you'll know that you can get to both of these neighborhoods on the 23 train, but they are in opposite directions. You get on the 23 train heading to Brooklyn if you want to go to Crown Heights and you get on the 23 train headed towards Manhattan if you want to go to the Upper West Side.

So I lived in Crown Heights for several years and shortly after I moved to the Upper West Side, I would start my commute home and I would - I was walking to the same subway train, I was getting on to the same platform and the train would come and I would get on the train and I would usually look desperately for a seat. If I couldn't find a seat I would find some place to grab on and then usually I would either pull out a magazine or start checking my email - terrible thing to do as soon as you leave work, but I used to do that quite a bit, and just start letting the train take me home.

Now, what happened on more than one occasion was that I would look up at some point and discover that I was on a train - I was on the 23

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train, I had gotten that part right but I was going in the entirely wrong direction. I was headed to my old apartment in Brooklyn instead of my new apartment in the Upper West Side. And the thing was, is that my brain was just on autopilot, right? It was just running a habit that it had done over and over and over again, which was leave work, walk to the subway, walk to the 23, walk down the stairs, get on the platform and get on the train heading to Brooklyn. But that wasn't a habit I wanted to do anymore, I had to start doing all of that - almost all of it but then get on the train heading to the Upper West Side.

I was making decisions about how to get home, I was not out of control, I was choosing - my brain was deciding what to do, but these decisions were part of a habit for me, and frankly a lot of times, I was leaving work and I was not paying a lot of attention to what was going on. I was just letting habit run the show instead of bringing awareness to it, and until I started to pay attention, I would find myself headed in the wrong direction.

Now, a lot of people will talk about this, especially with driving, which is not something super familiar to me because I lived in New York for 13 years, but a lot of people have this experience with driving. This idea of you know, you get behind the wheel of the car and you start driving and you find yourself going to the wrong place, right? Like maybe you are going to your old job, maybe you are going to your old home. Whatever it is, your brain just starts working on a habit and going where you used to go over and over again.

Now, you would never say I wasn't in control of the car, just like I would never say I wasn't in control of my commute home. It was just that in both instances, habit is running the show and you're not bringing awareness to it. Now, here's the thing: when we tell ourselves, I don't know what happened, I just fell off the wagon, we're saying the opposite, right?

What we're saying is, I wasn't in control, I wasn't making a decision, this thing just happened to me, and it's like you don't have any sort of role in the decision making or the responsibility, that it just was something that

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happened to you, right? It's this very passive idea. The problem with the idea of just falling off the wagon is that it ignores the fact that you are always making a choice. You are always making a decision, you are always, always drinking either because of a planned decision ahead of time that is not in response to the urge to drink, is not in response to your desire, but a planned choice. Or, you are drinking reactively in a response to an urge, in response to desire in the moment.

It's basically the difference between knowing that you're going out to a business dinner and that you want to be on your best behavior in front of your colleagues, so you're planning ahead of time, look, I'm only going to have a drink, or I'm not even going to drink at all. You're planning ahead of time what you want to do because it's important to you that you're on your best behavior, versus, meeting up with your friends for brunch and not planning, not even thinking that you're going to drink, and then you get there and people order a mimosa and you'll think, oh, I'll have one too, that looks good, and then they get another drink and you feel more desire and all of a sudden your Saturday, which you were not planned to have a buzzy or drunk Saturday late morning, early afternoon all of a sudden, there you are. You made that decision but it wasn't a proactive decision. It wasn't a planned decision, it was a decision that you made in the moment.

So when you are deciding to drink proactively, you're making that decision way ahead of ever feeling an urge. You're using your prefrontal cortex, you're saying that the part of your brain that is in charge of planning and thinking about long-term consequences is in control. And when you are drinking reactively, you are drinking in the moment, in response to an urge. It's a spontaneous decision but it's still a decision. It isn't planned, it's driven by a habit that's in your lower brain, and it may feel like you're not even making the decision to drink, it just happened, but you did. You did make that decision, you did pick up that glass, you did order another drink, you did head to the bar, whatever it is, you did make that decision. You're just not yet exerting any awareness around the habit. You're allowing it to be unconscious but you can always, always, always bring awareness to it.

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Now, here's the problem when you are drinking from a place of responding to an urge. When you drink reactively, it reinforces this habit cycle. So you feel the urge, you have the desire, you have a drink and then your brain gets a reward, either the dopamine, right? The influx of dopamine or also, the reward of changing how you feel, being in a different emotional state and your brain is like hey, this is nice, I like rewards, rewards are good, and guess what? When you have that reward, then you have more desire and then you're already in a place where you are responding to your desire to drink in the first place, so when your desire appears again for that second drink, guess what? You say yes again. And guess what? For many people this continues on and on and you are just fueling this habit cycle.

Nothing is wrong with your brain; we've talked a lot about this. Your brain is meant to run on habits, habits are what make humans so efficient. The only problem is, is that you have gotten really, really good at drinking because of an urge and in response to an urge and saying yes to your urges and doing this over and over and over again and every time your brain is getting rewarded, thereby reinforcing this cycle.

Before you can learn how to change this habit, the most important thing is that you have to understand that even if it a habit, even if it feels unconscious right now, it is still a decision. You did not just fall off the wagon, you made a choice. You made a decision to drink and that decision may have happened in the moment, you may not have been planning it, you may not have intended it, but it was still a decision.

The thing that you need to do is start bringing awareness to that. You need to start to understand drinking and also commitment as not things that happen to you, not these passive things. You are not on the wagon along for the ride where your commitment is passively being pulled forward, not by you; you're just sitting there, but by someone else, right? And you're also not in the position where you just fell off the wagon and who knows what happened, right? There's no rhyme or reason. There is. You just need

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to bring awareness and so this is why I really think that telling yourself that you just fell off the wagon is in some ways kind of detrimental.

I really do believe that this idea of being on the wagon or off the wagon is a fallacy. What's really going on is that you just don't yet know the thinking that contributed to your decision to drink, and frankly, you're probably not even looking at it as a decision. But once you start to understand it in those terms, once you start to understand that yes, you are making a decision, guess what? It brings authority back to you. You get authority about what's happening as opposed to saying that, I don't know, just things in my external environment bumped me off, I got jostled off the wagon, I have no idea how it happened. That's when you don't have authority.

You need authority, you need to understand that you are in charge of the decision that you make, even when those decisions are connected to habits. That is the way that you will feel in control again, but right now, you just haven't brought awareness to it. And so that is the thing to really pay attention to. Never, ever tell yourself that you just fell off the wagon. Tell yourself, I decided to drink, I made the decision to drink. Bring that authority back instead of being in this very, very passive place about it.

Alright everybody, that's it for this week's episode. Keep sending me your questions, your comments, your ideas, I really love hearing from you. You can always email me at podcast@rachelhart.com and I'll see you next week. Have a great week everyone.

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.