

Ep #117: Stop Overdrinking Part 2



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

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Hi and welcome to part two of Stop Overdrinking. In part one, we talked about the reasons why we desire to drink and how it's a learned desire and how we actually trained ourselves and practiced ourselves into that desire. In part two, we're going to talk about why it's so challenging for us to quit once that desire is programmed. I'm going to talk about some of the reasons why I wanted to cut back on my drinking and quit my drinking and why I found it so challenging. Then we're going to talk about the brain science behind it and how the brain science really reveals the reasons why it is so challenging. I want to remind you that the reason why we are able to quit is because we have our human brain and the reason why it's so difficult to quit is because of our animal brain. When we learn how to overcome our animal brain with our human brain, then we're going to be all set.

I referred to, in the beginning, that what has evolved us this far will not continue to evolve us unless we change it and we use the power of our brain to think about what we're thinking about and to become more conscious in order to evolve to the next level of, I think, human evolution.

Let's talk first about why most of us want to cut back and we can't. I'm going to start with the reasons why I wanted to cut back. I wanted to cut back because I really felt like there was a part of me that felt like I was out of control. I'm kind of a control freak and so the idea of being out of control kind of freaked me out. I never liked the point where I got after like three glasses where it was kind of like I really genuinely didn't feel in control of myself.

The main reason for me what happened was I started, I think because of my hormone changes, because I'm in my forties, I started just feeling terrible. I was waking up in the middle of the night. I wasn't able to go back to sleep. The next morning, I was feeling terrible. What used to be a horrible hangover after lots of drinking and a party night out became how I would feel maybe after two drinks and I felt foggy and I just couldn't quite get on my game as much as I

wanted to. Yet, in the evenings, I found myself like really looking forward to going home and having a drink and going out to the bar and having a drink. I had these like conflicting desires that didn't make any sense to me. I really kind of wanted to get to the bottom of it.

The other reason, for me, is I feel like I had kind of handled this whole emotional, compulsive eating issue and this was starting to feel very similar to that. I really wanted to reduce my drinking. I didn't like feeling drunk. I didn't like not being able to drive. I didn't like the feeling of regret. I didn't like having anxiety over what had happened the night before, what I might have said that I wouldn't have said had I not been drinking. That sort of thing.

I also was noticing like anxiety. This is when it really kind of started to bother me. One time I remember I went to a restaurant and the waiter was just taking forever to come around to ask us what we wanted to drink. I felt myself getting kind of anxious and I felt myself getting kind of like in a hurry about it. I remember thinking, "I'm just going to go to the bar and get a drink." I couldn't wait for the waiter and that made me nervous. What's going on that I'm like in such a hurry to have a cocktail? I heard myself talking about it a lot more like, "Hey, let's go get a drink. Let's go get a cocktail. Let's go get a drink. Let's go get a cocktail." I was like watching myself do that and I was curious about it. That was one of the reasons why I really decided that I wanted to.

Here's the other reason. When I did try, I wasn't successful. I'm pretty successful at most everything I do and so that was challenging for me. I would make a plan to drink less or I'd make a plan not to drink and I wasn't successful. It was like I had override going on in my brain. That really is what I had going on but I didn't realize it at the time. I was having something override me. All of that evolution and all of that learning and all of that programming was overriding my genuine desire in that moment and I did not like that feeling. It made me feel like I was out of control.

I think for so many people who struggle with this, they start this spiral where they start feeling like they can't cut back and they can't quit. Then they make that mean something very negative about themselves, which of course perpetuates this idea of needing relief

and feeling more anxiety and wanting more alcohol. It actually compounds the problem.

I think our options for hope in this area are very stigmatizing. I think that, like I spoke about before, I think that there's so few options where people are willing to admit that they're struggling with this because they're afraid of being labeled, they're afraid of being stigmatized and so so many people hide this from each other, from their friends, from their family or they glamorize it. They call it mommy juice or the pretty addiction, the "mommy needs her vodka" kind of thing. There's like lots of jokes about it. We've made it kind of funny and laughable so we feel like we have some camaraderie around it.

One of the other reasons why we attempt and then give up on trying to cut down or quit is we don't understand the difference between the struggle against that desire and the actual retraining that desire and managing that desire. If you go to bat against that desire, if you try and fight against it, you're always going to lose that battle because it's your immediate brain over your long-term brain. Immediate brain is always going to win in that moment if you don't know how to manage it.

I think that struggle that we feel against it creates so much anxiety and it gives us even more reason to want to drink. What happens is we see alcohol, we resist it for a moment, we use our will power, we struggle against it, and that creates anxiety. Most often, we then give into that desire to drink and solve the anxiety that we've created with the alcohol. We've actually created another neural pathway that's supporting us drinking. We already have the neural pathway that we've learned that alcohol equals reward and the dopamine creates that desire and perpetuates that desire. In our attempt to quit, we actually create a second neural pathway. The second neural pathway creates an additional desire to drink. It's so messed up. In our attempt to quit, we actually are training our brain to want it more because we give into that after that struggle and perpetuate the idea that alcohol provides relief.

If you are one of those people who's tried to quit and find yourself just drinking more, that's one of the reasons why. You've created an

additional neural pathway of desire. We do this inadvertently and we intensify our own desire unknowingly and then most of us make that mean that something is escalating and that there's something wrong with us, when really, we've just added desire to desire, unknowingly.

The other thing that happens is the more we drink, the more those dopamine receptors down regulate so we require even more substance to feel the same effect. Here's what's interesting. The desire intensifies. When we resist, the deprivation intensifies. We have this really increased desire. When we try to say no to it, the deprivation increases which perpetuates the idea that we're unhappy and that we're uncomfortable and that we need alcohol.

What is so fascinating about this and what I want you to really think about when it comes to this is that the thing that's creating the desire is the alcohol. The thing that's solving the desire is the alcohol. It's creating a desire for itself. I think that's why people think that it's so powerful but it's not. It's not powerful at all unless you add it your brain. Once you add it to your brain, it creates that reaction in your brain that basically makes your brain think that it's more important than it is.

Alcohol is not important at all in the world. It's really not. It's not important for our survival. It's not important for our well-being. It's not important for our evolution. Because of the reaction in the brain, the brain thinks that it is. It puts a huge importance on it because of that association. Once you've made that association, you're off to the races.

A side note that I want to make here is that I find it utterly fascinating that the ability to drink alcohol without getting addicted in our society is classified as normal, as if alcohol is part of our life and if you're unable to drink it without getting addicted, that you somehow have a disease. If you're unable to drink alcohol and not get addicted, there's something wrong with you, you have a disease. I find that ludicrous. I think people that are able to drink alcohol and not get addicted or don't have a preference for it are amazing but I don't think people that can't aren't. I don't think alcohol was something we were ever meant to concentrate the way that we have and use in the way we have. I certainly don't think people that can't tolerate it are diseased. I think

that people that can't tolerate it are very healthy and have a natural response to a substance that creates a perpetual desire.

I know I'm going to get a lot of hate mail for that and I know there's a lot of people that disagree but that's certainly my opinion in that situation and I've had a lot of exposure to alcoholism with my dad and drug addiction with my brother and my best friend. I've done a lot of research on the area. That is my opinion. I do not think that drinking alcohol is a normal part or should be considered something that we should be able to do and that there's something terribly wrong with us if we can't do it. That's just my opinion.

Now, remember, when we get into this cycle which is we try to quit drinking, in that process we create deprivation, we create anxiety, we create the idea that there's something wrong with us, we create the idea that we're completely out of control which, of course, leads us to drink more and more and more, which perpetuates the idea that there's something wrong with us, there's something wrong with us, which leads us to seek more relief in alcohol which perpetuates the problem. You can see how this problem is perpetuated. That's even just on the small scale that we're talking about which is going from two glasses of wine to three to maybe four. You can see how quickly that can increase.

By the way, it's the same with food. When we start depriving ourselves of sugar and then we go through sugar withdrawal and then we want it even more and then we eat it even more and then we want it even more. It's the same kind of thing. It's the same with many of the drugs that we have taken and concentrated and created that intense pleasure experience from before.

Now what we do when we start this overdrinking process is the smarter we are, the better we are at justifying it. Let me tell you the problem, what happens when we start justifying it is that we get into this process where we are creating thoughts that make drinking and overdrinking okay. We're providing even more learning for the desire to drink. We'll say, "Oh, it was just one. It doesn't matter. You're totally fine. Everybody drinks. Everyone gets hungover sometimes. It's funny when you're hungover." We start making all these justifications which we don't even realize at the time is perpetuating

this process, is giving so many more beliefs, so many more thoughts to this same concept that's creating additional and additional desire, which makes you feel more and more out of control which makes you want to resist it more which of course creates this deprivation which makes this cycle then continues.

Now, the problem with trying to use willpower is that willpower will deplete itself. We have a limited amount of willpower. It's what we call white-knuckling it. Basically, we're going to fight against this desire. We've put that urge up. The urge to drink has come up and we've like put a hand against it. We're trying to resist it. We're pushing against it. We're feeling deprived. We're feeling terrible. All we want is relief. Now we feel worse than we did before. Once it depletes, then we give in and drink and then we've perpetuated it again.

If you have tried to use willpower, if you've tried to use resistance, if you've tried to talk yourself out of it, if you've justified yourself, that has all made the desire to drink more. I know this is terrible news. I found this to be terrible news as well. We don't even realize that we're perpetuating this desire that's creating the problem in the first place. We're doing it unknowingly. We're doing it well intended. We're trying to take care of ourselves and we're creating the exact opposite results. Training yourself to desire alcohol is something that you've done unknowingly. Knowing that you've trained yourself to do it will also help you recognize that you can train yourself to undo it.

The other thing that I want to offer to you that is really important is that the desire to drink, the desire to overdrink is completely harmless. The fact that you have trained your lower brain to produce desire is completely harmless. There is nothing wrong with that happening. When it becomes harmful is when you obey that desire. When you don't recognize that that's a desire that you've trained yourself and you obey it and then you drink, that's when it becomes harmful. The desire in and of itself isn't harmful. The fact that you have so much desire to drink is not a problem. It's not a problem at all. That's why you can turn this around so quickly because you can coexist with that desire as long you're not trying to resist it. When you're trying to resist the desire, that's when you create the anxiety which makes the desire go up for the alcohol. You can coexist with that harmless desire with no problem.

Let's talk about this concept. It's an additional concept that also perpetuates the desire to drink. You have what we call cognitive dissonance. Cognitive dissonance is when you disagree with yourself. You have this desire to stop drinking and then you have this desire to drink. It's really important to make room for both of those desires and to understand where they're coming from and to give them both their due. We want to so quickly get rid of that desire to drink that we just try and smush it.

It's kind of like, I don't know how many of you guys have studied psychology. My undergrad is in psychology. We studied Pavlov's dogs. They basically did this experiment where every time they were about to feed the dogs, they rang a bell. They didn't even do this on purpose. What they noticed was when they rang a bell, initially it wasn't even a bell. Initially it was just when the dogs heard the women who wore clogs walking down the hall to feed them, they would start drooling. They would have this association with the reward that was coming. It was just an automatic response that was happening. I think that it's so important to understand that that is what's happening in your brain. It's this automatic Pavlovian response that you're having. When you try and just extinguish it, you're not going to be able to do it. It's kind of like putting the drool back in the dog's mouth. It's not going to work, right? The more they're going to want to eat.

The way that you teach a dog that's having the drool is you have them walk down and you have the clogs and then you don't feed them. You do that enough items that then they stop having that response. They stop having the experience of thinking that they're going to be fed every time the clogs come down. That's how I'm going to teach you how to do that with your own brain when it comes to alcohol. That's why resisting it doesn't work. It's already programmed in there. Resisting it just intensifies that desire.

It's important to understand when you have a cognitive dissonance, you're creating your own anxiety within yourself because you're trying to let one of those thoughts win. I want to drink. I don't want to drink. I want to drink. I don't want to drink. They're at battle within you.

Remember, with increased anxiety, it increases the desire to drink and get relief from that anxiety. That cognitive dissonance, when played against each other, is a problem. When you allow them to coexist with understanding, they are no longer a problem. You can unlearn the desire to drink just as easily as you have learned the desire to drink. I promise you that.

Now here's the other thing. When you stop drinking, you create withdrawal. This is even for us that just drink a couple of glasses of wine a night. We create an emotional withdrawal because we're not feeding that programming that we have. We're not closing the loop on that neural pathway. There's also the withdrawal from the dopamine that we would normally get when we honor that. What happens to many people is the alcohol that is causing that withdrawal is now satisfying that withdrawal as well. I can't even tell you how important it is.

What is causing the desire, what is causing the withdrawal, is also solving the withdrawal. What's causing the withdrawal is solving the withdrawal. It's causing the withdrawal and solving it. There's no way out of that loop. What happens is in order for you to feel normal, in order for you to not feel withdrawal, you have to consume the exact substance that is causing it. Can you see the perpetuation there? You can see how that would cause itself to want itself. That's why it feels so powerful to so many people is because the very thing that causes the withdrawal solves it.

Let's talk about this too. I think a lot of people don't want to quit alcohol because they think alcohol makes an experience better. I want to talk about that for a minute because one of the things that I've recognized since I cut back and stopped drinking is that alcohol doesn't make experiences better. It makes them tolerable and it makes them appear better. What alcohol does is it dulls your senses and so it makes the experience seem better than it is. I want you to think about it. It doesn't actually make the experience better. It makes it seem better.

I'm sure you guys have heard this when people are joking around a lot. If you drink a lot, then a potential mate gets more attractive. They're not actually more attractive, they just seem more attractive.

That's also true with experiences that we have. When we go to the bars and we drink, the experience seems better than it would be. The experience isn't actually better. It seems better. That distinction is everything and I want you guys to really think about that. When you think about I don't want to go to this wedding because it won't be any fun without alcohol, what you're really saying is the wedding isn't fun. I need to buffer myself. I need to dull my senses to get through it. If I drink alcohol, it will feel like it's fun. I will experience it as fun even though it's not fun.

Be really careful because here's what happens and this is what I notice happen in my life. Many things in my life that I needed to change to make my life better were not changed because I was buffering them with alcohol. There were certain relationships I was in, certain people I was hanging out with, certain experiences I was having that I was making tolerable by drinking wine that would otherwise had not been tolerable and I wouldn't have had them in my life. The question becomes, "Do I want to have a life that is only sustainable if I'm drinking or do I want to change my life so I actually don't need to drink to make it sustainable?"

The key there, and this is important to remember, is that you don't have to change your life first in order to stop drinking. If you stop drinking, then you'll really see what's true. It will reveal the truth about an experience for you.

An event that you don't enjoy, I promise you the reason why you're not enjoying it is not because of alcohol. The reason you're not enjoying it is because it wasn't an enjoyable event or you're not enjoyable, which it might be one or the other. What makes an experience good is what you really want to think about. If your answer to that, and I talk about this with my clients too. What makes an experience good? Is it food or is it alcohol or is it the experience itself and how you show up and interpret that experience? That's a really important distinction.

Drinking really made me think that friends, activities, parties, jobs, and relationships were much better than they were. Noticing that they needed a little bit of help prevented me from changing what I needed to change in my life. I'm so happy now to really have the truth of my

life so I can really make conscious decisions about it.

The other thing is, I wrote this down when I was preparing. It's kind of interesting. I said, "Maybe you aren't feeling deprived because you aren't drinking. Maybe you're feeling deprived because the experience is not what you desire." I think that's really an interesting way of looking at it. A lot of people will think about not drinking and they'll think their life will be very dull and they won't enjoy it and it won't be great and they won't like it. I think that if you believe that your enjoyment of life is what you make of it and how you create it, then you won't rely on alcohol to provide you with that. You know what I'm saying? It's like well it doesn't matter that my life sucks because I have alcohol. Wouldn't it be better if your life just didn't suck? I think that's really important for people to be honest with themselves about.

I used to watch my kids thoroughly enjoy events and they weren't drinking. They didn't have alcohol and they had such a great time. I remember feeling like, "Oh, I want that to be my life. I don't need to have a cocktail in order to enjoy it. I want it to be able to be something that I show up and enjoy it because I'm me." I think a lot of times we convince ourselves that we need it in order to make our life better. I think that that's a really important thing for you to think about. Why do you need to drink at certain events and would you not have those events in your life anymore if you weren't able to drink? Really important questions to ask.

One of the things I'd like to recommend that you do is make a list of all the reasons why you think you overdrink. What are the things in your life that you're trying to solve with alcohol? Do you like these reasons? Are they worth it? Question everything.

I want to remind you that I'm not suggesting that you have to give up alcohol completely. What I'm suggesting is that you look at the reasons why you're drinking. Are you drinking because alcohol has perpetuated the desire for itself? Are you drinking because of unconscious programming? Are you drinking because you're trying to buffer your life that's unacceptable to you? Knowing the truth about why you're drinking will make it much easier for you to cut back or quit drinking.

You need to decide consciously what you believe. You need to decide consciously what you want to train your brain to do, what you want to train your brain to desire. You have done it unconsciously. How do you want to feel about drinking less? Do you want to feel excited about it or do you want to feel bummed about it? If you want to feel excited about it, you have to release that desire.

Here's what I want you to think about. If you really want something and I tell you you can't have it, you're going to be very bummed. If you don't really want it and I tell you you can't have it, you're not going to really care. Our goal is to work on that piece of that desire so it's not overriding your other desire, which is to drink less. We're going to talk a lot about that in part three on how to reprogram your brain and how to unlearn the Pavlovian response of wanting to drink alcohol and I'm going to introduce you to all of the tools that I used personally to completely reverse and unlearn my desire to want alcohol. I absolutely have no desire for it. I genuinely prefer not to drink it anymore. If that's something that you want or if you want just to prefer it less, make sure you join me for part three. I'll see you then.

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