This is Annie Grace, and you're listening to This Naked Mind podcast, where without judgment, pain, or rules, we explore the role of alcohol in our lives and culture. Hi, friends. It's Annie Grace, author of This Naked Mind, answering your questions. Today I'm going to answer a follow-up question from Mark. He asked yesterday about does alcohol make you happy. So, he followed up and he asked, "Just wondering how long the effect of excess alcohol has on the brain signaling pathways." And again, we covered this yesterday how over time alcohol can actually make you unhappy and rob your joy from things that used to make you happy because of the things that happen in the brain and the chemicals that are released to counteract alcohol. So, that was yesterday's video. Definitely watch it if you're curious.

Mark says, "I found that despite not drinking, I do struggle to get on the same wavelength as the other people around me on the occasions when they're all imbibing. When I used to be a party animal, I now feel slightly detached. Any tips?" And yes, I remember this well. I think that you have the initial euphoria of kind of realizing that you never have to drink again and you're not going to need to drink again. That lasts, and that's really great, and it gets you through a lot of the first initial social occasions just feeling free. Then, what happens is that the truth is that you are separate. You are doing something separate.

I mean, if everybody met for a poker party and you weren't playing poker, you would feel separate from her friends. I think that is just really hard, and we have to say that that is just hard. It is really unfortunate that people meet to drink and that we think we meet to drink. Because actually, what we're really meeting for it is for the conversation and the connections, and we're social beings. We're social people. So, we misinterpret, both us and our friends. I think it's kind of this cycle. We misinterpret when someone's not drinking that they're no longer part of that.

Early days when I stopped drinking, I just went to all my friends. I was like, "I don't drink anymore. Yay for me." I just had no idea that I was going to get negative reactions. I mean, I was so naive on this point that I thought, "This is great. Like, of course." I had one friend call me. I hadn't seen her forever. Finally, we got on the phone and she said, "Yeah, I just have to admit to you that I was really afraid that we wouldn't be able to connect without our margaritas." Now, this is a girl I've known since I was four years old, okay? So we connected for, you know, decades without margaritas. But then suddenly, because we had drank Margaritas together every time we had spent time together, she was really afraid that we wouldn't be able to connect without drinking.

So, a few of those sorts of things happened where my friends weren't very positive about it, and they felt like, "Oh, well, what about our friendship? Will we be able to connect? Will we have anything to say?" We all come to rely so heavily on alcohol to grease the wheels, if you will, to help us let our hair down that they were afraid. Then, in turn, I became afraid. So then I felt like I was making everybody uncomfortable. You know, you have one or two times where people are like, "Oh, it's boring," or they react defensively, like they feel like they're being judged, even though that wasn't my intent. Then suddenly, I felt like I was making people feel uncomfortable.
Annie: So then, I remember one time when I was, you know, had stopped drinking about six or seven months and it was a new mom at school. She invited me over to her husband's birthday party. She's like, "There's going to be a shot ski. Everybody's going to be drinking." That wouldn't have bothered me, but I was like, "If I show up and I don't drink, I'm going to ruin their party." I seriously felt like everybody's going to feel so uncomfortable that I'm not drinking because it kind of circular thing, you know? I did make a few people feel uncomfortable. Then I thought I was going to make everybody feel uncomfortable. Anyway, all this to say there's a lot of crap you have to work through around this. Because reality is you're doing something separate. You are doing something separate. I think that the key things to remember is that it might be awkward, it might be uncomfortable.

Annie: In terms of the specific question around how long does your brain actually changed back, the alcohol, you know, for me, it was about 30 days of weirdness, just kind of not feeling quite on balance. But according to the National Institute of Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, that any cognitive impairment in your brain can start to show significant improvement after a year. Now, I realized that a year seems like a long time, but there's two really important things to remember. Number one is that the year is kind of like the magic amount of time. Because once you've gone through a year, you've gone through every single social experience, every single holiday, every single birthday, and you've done it without alcohol. Now, instead of just having this idea, yes, someone else is telling me I don't actually need this to have a good time, someone else is telling me I don't actually need this to relieve stress, you have a whole year under your belt of your own experiences, and there's nothing more powerful to retraining your unconscious to remembering the fact that you don't need to drink to have fun than your own experiences. So, a year was really magical.

Annie: For me, it was actually about 15 months after I stopped drinking that I was able to get off my final antidepressants. So, it was kind of that first year was, you know, I started to feel a lot better and I started to feel a lot less depressed, so I actually ... I think it really ... You know, the first year there's a lot of questions. How is this party going to be? How is that person going to react? How is this holiday going to go? How is it going to be at happy hour? And then when you get through all that stuff, it's incredibly empowering.

Annie: I guess very specifically in terms of tips for feeling detached, I think that can come from a lot of places. I think that it can come from the fact that you're mourning a bit for something that wasn't actually true. You know, I felt myself ... I knew now because I'd done self-experimentation. I'd gotten drunk by myself in a room and I videotaped it. I knew that it didn't make me have more fun. You know, I knew that it wasn't actually relaxing me, but it was adding to my stress.

Annie: All these things I knew and I was certain of in my brain, in the moment, I didn't feel it. I missed the placebo effect. I missed the fact that if I thought that I could pour something into my glass and drink it down and feel better about myself, that by itself, just that thought gave me so much kind of control over my life and hope that when I didn't have that anymore, even though I knew it was fake, and even though I knew alcohol wouldn't help, I honestly mourn for the placebo effect. I think, so that's happening in the earlier
days. You’re readjusting to this. I do think that people treat you a bit strange, and then you end up internalizing that and not really knowing how to feel.

Annie: Then, the other thing I think is that we did. We used it to quickly reduce our inhibitions. It turns off your brain. It makes you take more risks because you’re not registering those risks in the same way you were a minute before. I mean, alcohol does that. It slows down your brain function. It slows your ability to react to things, including risks. So, the idea of going and initiating conversation can be a little bit intimidating. But, my advice would be try to be in the present moment, as cliche as that is. Look at a party or a social opportunity as an experiment.

Annie: So even if you're not going to look at it with this gloom and doom, I'm never gonna drink again, this is going to be miserable, say, "This is an experiment tonight. How can I see how I can make this fun tonight? How can I remember that I don't need to drink tonight?" Then, go at it with, "What is my purpose here? My purpose is to maintain and develop social connections, which is absolutely key to my well-being. How am I going to do that? I'm going to go and I'm going to just start asking questions. I'm going to get to know other people. I'm going to help them feel heard and valued." Then, go at it with, "What is my purpose here? My purpose is to maintain and develop social connections, which is absolutely key to my well-being. How am I going to do that? I'm going to go and I'm going to just start asking questions. I'm going to get to know other people. I'm going to help them feel heard and valued."

Annie: And guess what happens? As soon as that takes off, all the other stuff goes away. You know, it's when you're standing on the sidelines wondering if alcohol was really key to having a good time that you start to worry. But as soon as you start to get into good conversations with people, both of you actually forget to drink. We had some people over to our house, and I still ... You know, people want to bring beer or whatever, I'm like, "Yeah, sure. Bring your beer." Nobody brings drinks to my house anymore, and guess what? We have the best time. We have the best social situations and connections because people just realize that conversation is fun, and my house has now become a place where you don't need to drink because you have fun anyway.

Annie: I think that happens, but you have to be patient with yourself. You have to be forgiving of yourself. And you just have to give it time, because it is uncomfortable at first. I mean, we are deeply, deeply ingrained with this belief that alcohol is important to social situations, and that will take some time to reverse. Remember, it's not true. You didn't need it before. You don't need it now, and you will be a happier, healthier, better person without it.

Annie: This has been Annie Grace with This Naked Mind podcast. Thank you so much for listening. You can learn more at thisnakedmind.com. And please remember to rate, review, and subscribe, as it really helps us spread the word.