

Annie Grace: 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.

Scott Pinyard: Hey, everybody. It's Scott Pinyard, head coach of This Naked Mind, and I am back for another edition of coaching questions. I've got four awesome questions here and I'm going to dive right in.

Question number one goes like this: "I stopped drinking for a month and was feeling great. I had some very stressful events happen, a huge trigger for me, and started drinking again, thinking it would be short-lived. Now, four weeks later, I'm frustrated that I'm struggling to stop again. Did you have any struggles like this and is this 'normal'?"

Oh, man. Listen, first and foremost, before I get into my answer, I want to suggest that if this is you, or if you find yourself in a similar position, to take a deep breath and give yourself some grace. Yes, this happens. This is part of the process. I don't know if you've seen how Annie writes out, she did this at the live event a couple of years ago, but she had this graph that basically just had a straight line up and to the right and it was like, "This is what we think the process is going to look like, that we're going to decide to quit drinking and then make all the right decisions, and then boom, we're alcohol-free. This is what the process really looks like," and it's a squiggly line that's all over the place, right?

This journey is full of ups and downs and there's no way around that and so giving yourself grace and saying, "You know what? Of course this was the solution that my brain came up with to difficult triggers. That's what I've been doing for a long time," right? Giving ourselves that grace is how we can learn from that event and then effectively move forward as opposed to what we are all used to doing, which is just beating ourselves up about it, right, just getting mad at ourselves, like, "How could you let yourself down like this?" Right? That sort of negative self-talk doesn't actually create the positive emotion that we need to help get you to the other side of this.

I alluded to this a little bit earlier, but the fact is that alcohol has been the solution for problems for a lot of us for a very long time, right, and our emotional resiliency, our ability to handle the problems that are in front of us, that is something that's like a muscle, right, and just like any other muscle, if we don't use it for a period of time, it atrophies, and so this is where I think the rubber meets the road for a lot of people who are going through this process. They're finding, "Okay, I've decided to quit drinking. Here, I'm at day one, all right, day two, day three, day four," and then something big and stressful happens, something unexpected, and when this happens to us, our brain's initial response, and I'm going to go into in a second why this is why this happens, our brain's initial response is to reach for the solution that seemed to be working for a long time.

You see, from your brain's point of view, when you get anxious about something and then take a drink, that anxiety, at least initially, goes down, your brain's associated alcohol with feeling better. Of course, it's going to do that, right? Your brain's trying to protect you. Your brain is recognizing, "Wait a minute, there's some pressure building up. There's some stress building up here. I need to let some of that pressure off by having a drink."

Now, ultimately, this is your brain acting exactly as it's supposed to, right? The survival part of your brain is meant to keep you alive. It's meant to help you do the things you need to do, like breathe and eat and procreate in order for the species to propagate and what happens when we have an alcohol use disorder is that part of our brain becomes convinced that alcohol is added to that list, right, and so yes, stress comes up, that thought comes up, and if we're relatively new alcohol-free, that can be a real challenge, so first and foremost, I just want you to understand that this is a completely normal part of the process.

Now, to the second part of your question where you said "Four weeks later, I'm frustrating that I'm struggling to stop again," what that indicates to me, and you can be the judge of this, is that continuing to beat yourself up about what happened a month ago is not actually allowing you to take the lessons from it. I can tell you, I've been through so many quits, I've done this so many times, and it was only when I gave myself the grace that I was able to move forward in a way that was longterm productive.

Let me give you something that you can do, a concrete action that you can take now that can help get you moving in that direction. The first thing I want you to do is take a big deep breath and I want you to reframe this thing for yourself, not as a massive mess-up, right, not as something that I can't believe I did, right? I don't want you to look at it like that. How I want you to look at it is I want you to look at it as what we call a data point, right? A data point, the idea behind the data point idea concept is that every time this happens, we're getting more information, and then more information is always a good thing, right?

If you frame this as a data point, if you frame this as, "All right, there is something in here I can learn, right, whether it was how all quickly I reacted or how quickly I made the decision to reach for alcohol or what that particular trigger was and how can I avoid it in the future," I don't know your specific situation, so I can't really comment on that. What I can say, though, from a 30,000-foot view is that this event is full of information for you.

Here's the activity: After you take that deep breath, I want you to sit down with a piece of paper and non-judgmentally talk to yourself, write down what are the lessons that you learned from this, right? One of the reasons that it can be super frustrating to head back into drinking is that we just feel like we're stuck, like this is happening to us, right? If you instead say, "Hey, here are the things I am learning," if you can take some good out of that situation, it's going to be much

easier for you to give yourself grace, and once you realize what those things are, figure out how to integrate them, right?

I remember I was coaching someone one time who had a neighbor that just set her off. Now, there are a whole bunch of reasons, and we've gone through and done a lot of ACT Technique work on it, but one of the things initially was "Stay away from Gladys," it was that easy, but she recognized, "Wait a minute, this is something that's not helping me, so in these early days, I'm going to stay away from Gladys," and then eventually deal with the things, but until you get those reps, right, until you get those muscles built back up of emotional resiliency.

So, yes, people have struggles like this all the time, it is incredibly common, and the way that you talk to yourself about them and the lessons and the information that you pull out of it, the way you frame it for yourself makes all the difference, so give yourself a huge heaping of grace here, take a deep breath, figure out what those lessons are, figure out how to integrate those lessons into what you're doing now, and carry on. I promise you, the only way that this isn't going to work for you is if you give up. All right, I hope that helps. Thank you for writing that in. I know how frustrating that is.

Let me go on to question number two: "To be honest, I feel a little competitive with others who have already quit drinking and tell me how much better their lives are. I'm waiting for a switch or something to go off in my head and move me forward to letting go of the wine, but despite my consciousness of all that's bad about the booze, I'm only backing off, not letting go. Thoughts?"

Yes, I have a lot of thoughts about that, a few things. First of all, one of the things that can be so huge for us is hearing other people's stories. I remember when I was early on, before I even found This Naked Mind, my dad had gone through AA, I had long talks with him about it, I had some friends and connections and other people who had quitting drinking stories and their stories were ultimately very inspiring to me.

However, there is a time when you start saying, "Wait a minute, that's not going to be like me. I can never do that," right? And someone's recounting some sort of adversity that they've overcome because of alcohol and how they've moved on and it can all feel very hopeful, but it can also feel almost oppressive, right? It's almost like, "Man, look at all this work I have to do ahead of me."

So, a couple of things I'd like you to keep in mind: First, don't compare yourself to other people, and I understand we all do it, we do it all the time. We do it about our houses and our cars and our salaries. We do it about our bodies, we do it about our personalities, we do it about everything we possibly can. But here's the thing with comparison: No matter what you do, you're not going to have that other person's backstory, which then logically it follows that you will not have their future, right? Your story is your own story. The particular mix of

ingredients, the stuff that brought you to where you're at right now is yours and yours alone. It's unique to you.

Yes, there may be things from other people's stories that you can take away, but comparing yourself to them and saying, "Wait a minute. Well, he went through way worse stuff than I did. How come I can't give this up?" Right? That's not going to be helpful. What is going to be helpful is comparing yourself to yourself and your question actually belies a little bit of progress that I think deserves some recognition, right? You said "I'm 'only' backing off, not letting go." Backing off is progress.

One of the things that people talk to us about with this mindset shift process, right, so when you go through some of our programs, they're designed to give you a shift in your thinking and therefore your emotions around alcohol. One thing that's very common and happens a lot is that it doesn't go like that, right? When we say "mindset shift," it almost sounds like it should be this overnight thing where suddenly, "Boom, I've shifted. Fantastic." That's not how it works. What happens generally over time is we start to notice little changes, we start to notice little shifts, and one of those shifts is not wanting to drink as much and it looks like that's happening to you, so first and foremost, celebrate that progress, right? Stop comparing to other people, compare to yourself, and if you compare to yourself, it looks like you are indeed making progress.

The last thing that I'll say about this is the amount of time that it takes anyone to get... Well, actually, second to last thing, the amount of time that it takes anyone to get anywhere through any sort of change is so hugely dependent on so many individualized factors that comparison is almost silly, right? There are so many things that happen. You could probably think of a time in your life when you went to change something and then you realize, "Oh, the stars just aligned and I just did it," right? Then there'll other times, maybe it was something you wanted to change that felt really simple and it just was impossible-feeling, right? There are so many circumstances in our lives that set us up to blow us in different directions, so comparing how easy or difficult it was for someone else versus you, it's just not a good comparison, right? The variables are going to be very different.

Lastly, what I will say is this: As you continue to move forward, as you continue to work through this process, continue to pay attention to how your own thoughts are shifting. There is something to be known as personal momentum, right? The fact that you've already backed off is awesome. You can do what we all building off of wins, right, so like, "Oh, I didn't drink as much last night as I normally would," or, "Oh, I went to that party and didn't drink," or, "Oh, I did this and didn't drink," right? Celebrate that. There is a lot of psychology around the idea of celebrating our wins and really taking credit for it. We're terrible at this. We're terrible at giving ourselves credit for when we've made progress, so take a moment, pat yourself on the back. I mean, even physically do it, but do something to celebrate the progress you've made. As you do that, you'll notice

that your mood is going to improve, right? As you recognize that you're making progress, that's going to make everything easier for you.

I'm really excited about how you're backing off. Letting go is going to come when it's going to come. Keep doing the work that you're doing, keep looking at your thoughts and emotions, keep doing those ACTs, and you will see it continue to shift and you'll get to a place where you will be letting go and then that will be that for you. But thanks for writing it in. That's a great question. A lot of people struggle with it.

Next up: "How do you deal with stress now that there's no alcohol to take the edge off?" Funny question. Here's one of the things that I think is actually one of the coolest parts of going alcohol-free: By now, you guys know me and you know that I am a fan of an alcohol-free lifestyle, but that process of going alcohol-free, that process of doing the ACT Techniques and having the mindset shift and rediscovering how to live life without alcohol is full of so many amazing things that it's hard to even say like, "Oh, this is my favorite," or "This isn't my favorite," but learning how to deal with stress to me is one of the best ones because I had to go through this and this was a huge struggle for me.

At the time that I quit drinking, I wasn't doing well. We'll put it that way. I wasn't doing well financially. The job that I had was not a good fit for me, there's a massive amount of stress. My family and I were living in this small apartment, we were crammed together. I had two kids. At the time, they were five and three, five and two, something like that? No, six and two, and it was a lot and so there was a lot of stress and so to me, alcohol was the thing that was helping me with that.

Now, once I recognized that alcohol was actually causing a lot of that stress, as you've probably recognized if you're reading the book or going through the live alcohol experiment, that was great because I'm like, "Oh, cool. This is actually contributing to my stress," but my happiness about that was short-lived because I very quickly realized, "Wait, if that's not the solution, then what is the solution?" Right? What is the thing that helps me? This is why it's so cool, because I recognized that was no longer a solution, I had to find a new one, which meant I got to experiment, right? I got to try a lot of different things and I totally did, right? There were things that I tried that I'm going to keep. There are things that I tried that I'm not going to keep.

Now, I'll give you a couple of things that you can work with with some examples of what it changed for me. One of the biggest things, at least for me personally was exercise. Because I was drinking, I wasn't really exercising in the evenings and I obviously didn't feel so great in the mornings, and so regular exercise was not a thing that I was used to, so once I was trying to deal with stress, and if you look this up, you'll see everywhere, they tell you that exercise can be a fantastic way to deal with it. Now, exercise does not have to mean lifting a bunch of weights, right, although that is very good and I enjoy doing that, exercise can

also mean going for a walk, right? Exercise can also mean just playing with the kids in the backyard. It doesn't need to be this big formal thing.

For me, what that was is I found an activity called rucking, which you essentially just put weight on your back and you'd go for long walks and I would do that for hours. I would go miles and miles, I'd go 15, 20 miles sometimes, just wherever, just around Portland here, and for me, it was huge because I always would feel this pent up energy before I started, and every time I came back, not only was that pent up energy kind of gone, but I felt tired, but tired in a good way, so exercise and moving your body is a good thing.

Changing your scenery is another thing. A lot of times people are dealing with stress and they feel trapped, they feel stuck. It's a little difficult now. We're in the midst of, obviously, COVID, but dealing with getting yourself out of your house, going for a walk, going to a park to the extent that is safe, changing what is physically around you can make a big difference. I did this through going to a park at my lunch break while I had my old job and it was really simple and I ate the same thing, I just ate it somewhere else, but that change of scene also changed the environment my brain was in, which changed a lot of my thoughts, so that's something that can help.

The last thing I'll give you is doing something with your hands. One of the things that a lot of us end up with after we quit drinking is some nervous energy, like "Look at all this time I have. What do I do with this time?" Right? I've tried all types of different things, all types of different crafts, all types of stuff that I like to do. A couple of things that I've settled on that have really worked for me longterm: Playing music, right, so I'll get my guitar out and that feels great and I can feel almost from when I first put my fingers on the fretboard, I can feel my stress level go down, right? It's something that I'm focused on, it's something that's enjoyable for me.

As far as crafts go, the thing that I've held on to the longest has been knitting. I love knitting. I knit scarves, right? I'm at a place now where I can do it and have a conversation with my wife. I can do it while I'm watching TV, or I can do a more complicated, intricate project that I have to focus on, but it was a matter of using my hands, right? It was a matter of something that I had to put my focus into and I found that when I put my focus into that, I didn't have room for the stress. It just left, right, so explore that, that's another option for you as well.

This, again, like I said, is actually, as difficult as it may feel right now, is one of the most exciting parts of this journey that you're on, and so I want to say congratulations, and I know it feels like a problem, but I am telling you, there are so many awesome things available for you on the other side. Try these things out. Again, get some exercise, change your environment, use your hands, right, try out activities. This is a fantastic and fun time. You've got a bunch of found hours right now and you can use them to just experiment with different

things. I promise you that the more you experiment, the more likely you're going to be to find something that does help you, to find something that helps you take a breath, and that will make a huge difference. I hope all of that helps. What a great question and congratulations now that there's no alcohol, that's a really good thing, and I know that you'll find something that'll help you.

Okay, last question: "Huge problem. I was doing really well, three days alcohol-free after just starting the intensive video program, but my husband was out of town. As soon as he came back, he bought wine and gin and started drinking. It seems like he just doesn't care that I'm trying very hard to change my relationship with alcohol and he's just making it harder. What should I do?" What an awesome question, and so, yeah, I mean, this gets at the heart of what a lot of people experience when they go through this, which is "Man, I'm going to quit alcohol, but not everyone around me going to, right? I know that I want something I want to change, but most people around me aren't going to, so what do I do?"

Very specific because this is your husband. Here is what I see work the most often in these situations. First is for you on your own to take some time and decide, "What sort of support do I need, right? What do I need from him? What do I need from him to feel successful? What do I need from him to really make a difference for me?" and think about what that might be. Maybe it's no drinking at home, maybe it's not drinking every night, maybe it's not drinking too much. I don't know what that might be for you, but really sit down and say, "All right, if my husband's going to support me, what is it that I want?" and maybe it's not drinking at all, in which case that's a conversation, but get clear first on what is it that you really want, what is it that you really need for support.

Step two is to have a conversation. Now, obviously, don't have this conversation while he's drinking, but when the opportunity arises, tell him and speak very much about yourself, right? This isn't about him, right? This isn't about him not listening to you or not caring, right? Those are stories that you're telling yourself. Unless you've already very directly asked him to help you in specific ways, he has no idea what's going on in your head, and so you can't really fault him for not changing his behavior.

During this conversation, you have a conversation and just express those needs very clearly, like, "Hey, I would really appreciate it if you had two nights a week where you didn't drink, that would be so much easier for me. Here's why," right? Or, "Hey, you know what? If you don't mind, when we go out to dinner, can we just not order alcohol? It's something that's tough for me and I want to get used to doing it," right? If you make a very specific ask, he'll have something to respond to. Now, it may be that the things that you need, the things that you think you need to get the most support are not things that he's willing to going to give you, and that's okay, right? The fact that you've expressed this need means that you've asked for it and now it's time to plan around it.

I know someone who, this is a really funny story, this was in the intensive about a year-and-a-half ago. She had a similar problem; she was quitting drinking and her husband was coming home every night and had alcohol and it was really, really hard for her and so we had this similar conversation and so what she did was she had this conversation with him, he basically said "No," and she goes, "Okay, well, if that's the case, then I'm going to sit downstairs in the den while you're up here drinking."

That's what she did, right? She knew it was a temporary thing. She knew it was a thing that she just needed for a little while, but she did it, and then guess what happened? After about a month, he started getting a little curious, right? He's like, "Wait a minute. What are you doing? You seem happier, you seem better, but we're not hanging out as much. What's happening?" Right? After a while, he actually came around to the idea, and not only did he come around to the idea, but he was watching the videos of the intensive by the time the intensive was done.

Now, I'm not saying that is going to happen specifically with you and your husband, but what I am saying is that requesting the support we need and then giving ourselves what we need even if the other person isn't willing to help at that point, that is how we meet our own needs and that is how we can create for ourselves an atmosphere of change, and when you do that, other people notice, right, and so that is my suggestion and I know that that can be difficult and I know that for a lot of couples drinking is what they did together for a very long time.

Just recognize and understand that this is going to be a process of change, right? This is something that is going to happen over time and so it's okay if right away, it feels like you're a little disjointed. As time goes on, as you get your alcohol-free sea legs under you and as your husband gets more used to you not drinking, things will shift, right, and you'll get to a point where you don't feel so bogged down by his drinking anymore and that whole new conversation can open up. I hope that helps. Great question. I want you to know 100% you're not alone, so go over to the Facebook page, to the This Naked Mind Facebook group and talk about it there. A lot of people have this same issue and having a conversation about it can help so much, but I really appreciate you writing in the question.

All right, folks, that's it for me. Thank you for listening this month, and as always, I will be back next month to answer some more of your questions. Have a great day.

Annie Grace:

Hi, I'm so excited, you guys, because we are just about to start another live alcohol experiment and if you do not know about the alcohol experiment, you need to literally drop everything right now and go to thisnakedmind.com/lae, that's "LAE" for "Live Alcohol Experiment," and here's the thing: This 30-day challenge is designed to interrupt your pattern and put you back in touch with

the best version of you. You know it's that version that's living the most joyful life, that version that doesn't need alcohol to relax or have a good time, and that version that's having more fun is more peaceful than ever. Again, it's a 30-day challenge, it's live. It's starting on the 1st, so hurry up. Go to thisnakedmind.com/lae, and as always, rate, review, and subscribe to this podcast, as it truly helps the message reach somebody who might need to hear it today.