

Ep #90: Numbing



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With Your Host

Rachel Hart

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You are listening to the *Take A Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, episode 90. Welcome to the *Take A Break* podcast with Rachel Hart. If you are 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.

Now listen, everybody, welcome. I have to tell you something. You know what, I recorded this entire podcast episode yesterday. I did it while the baby was sleeping. I was very proud of myself for being really efficient. Baby was sleeping, I was recording. And I sent it to my lovely podcast producer, Pavel, yesterday, and he wrote me this morning and he said, "Got some bad news, Rachel. That audio is unusable."

That was not what I wanted to hear. But I will tell you this: I learned the most amazing thought years and years ago when I was living in New York. It was before I was a life coach. I was working in communications and I had a really amazing boss who before she was working at this organization, she was a reporter for The Financial Times, she had covered the wars in the Balkans. I mean, this woman was really a badass and she had a lot of experience writing.

And whenever we would be working on documents together, whenever we would lose them, which I don't know why it happened but we would lose documents a lot. Speeches, press releases, whatever we were writing, somehow, we would always lose them. And she would always say, "Don't worry Rachel, it's better the second time around."

And at first when she shared that thought with me I remember thinking, "No, it's not. That's crazy." But you know what? I worked with her for years and I realized it is always better the second time around and so that's what I told myself when Pavel told me that this audio wasn't going to work. Today's podcast episode, it's going to be so much better than what I did yesterday.

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Alright, so I'm going to talk with you guys about the topic of numbing today, but before I dive in, I want to let you know that later this month I'm actually offering a live version of my six-week solution course. This is a course that combines all my best coaching material to help you take a break from drinking and do so in a way that really goes beyond willpower, beyond just saying no, and previously, it has only been available as a self-study course but I'm going to be doing a live course at the end of October.

So if you are interested, if you want to work with me live, if you want to learn how to change your desire, then all you need to do is head on over to rachelhart.com/live and sign up for when I release more information about what that's going to look like. So if you're interested, make sure you head on over. [Rachelhart.com/live](https://rachelhart.com/live).

Alright, so yesterday morning I woke up in San Francisco and it was raining. It was raining. It has not rained in the Bay area in six months, and I will tell you as an East coaster, this is still a little strange. The weather here I still don't fully get. But it was raining and I looked out the window and I realized, oh my gosh, my baby has never experienced rain before. This is his first experience with rain.

So I took him to the window and I talked to him all about rain and what it's like and then later that morning we headed outside. I had him in the stroller, and you know what? The world smelled amazing. It smells so good after it rains. And we were looking at everything together and I was talking to him about it and it was just this really wonderful, wonderful morning.

Now, listen, that was a wonderful morning but not every moment with this little boy has been bliss. In fact, a lot of moments have been the opposite. The night before, my husband and I were trying desperately to get him to go down to sleep but he just wanted to scream his head off. Now, if you are a parent, you can probably relate to going through the mental checklist of okay, the baby's fed, the baby's burped, I changed the diaper, what's going on?

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You go through that checklist of what could be wrong and you can't find anything and still your baby is really unhappy. And so my husband and I were just taking turns tagging each other to say okay, it's your turn, no, it's your turn. Going back and forth really trying to calm him down.

Now, I'm going to tell you, I would be nowhere in this journey on motherhood without the think-feel-act cycle. Since we have welcomed this little baby boy into our family, I have been coaching myself all the time. And that night, I watched my brain think over and over, what's wrong with him? Why won't he calm down?

And of course, those thoughts created stress and anxiety for me. And when I feel anxious, when I feel stressed, what do I do? I rush around. I'm rushing, trying to solve, trying to fix. And so I was rushing around the nursery trying to do everything I could think of to get him to settle down. I was rocking him and shushing him and singing and patting and bouncing and nothing was working. And you can imagine that frantically shifting from one calming technique after another is not all that calming. And meanwhile, my blood pressure was just rising and rising.

So where did that think-feel-act cycle lead me? Well, I kept thinking and kept believing something was wrong with him. So I was feeling anxious and then out of that anxiety, I was scrambling to fix it and frankly, a way that wasn't very helpful. Because my brain was thinking, you know, unless he is happy and content and sleeping, that something was wrong. And that thought, something is wrong, that's what was creating all my problems in that moment.

Now, if you are a regular listener to this podcast, you have heard me many times say the negative emotions are not a problem. They're not an emergency or a sign that something has gone terribly wrong. But that's how I was treating his negative emotion on that night.

Human beings, all of us are meant to experience the entire spectrum of positive and negative emotions. That's how we were built. We aren't supposed to feel happy and joyful all of the time. And you know why?

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Because we need the contrast. You can't have the light without the dark. You literally could not experience the emotion of calmness unless you knew its opposite, unless you knew what it was like to feel stressed. You need contrast. If you didn't know sadness, how could you know joy? You need the light and the dark.

And you know what? Emotions, these things that a lot of us spend so much of our lives running from, they really are what make our lives Technicolor. Without emotions, everything would be flat. This flat, unremarkable set of events. There would be no depth, no distinction. Every moment would just be another moment in the millions of moments that make up our lives.

So that night, I just started practicing thinking when I noticed my brain telling me, thinking that something was wrong, the fact that he was upset, I started practicing instead the thought, "My baby is upset, and that's okay. He's supposed to be upset sometimes. Sometimes, human beings are upset. That's not a problem. My job is not to fix it. I just need to be here with him and show him that even though he's crying, even though he's upset, he is safe."

And honestly, just that shift, that shift alone in thinking helped me relax a little bit. And instead of seeing his crying as a problem that needed to be fixed immediately, I just started to accept what was happening. And that acceptance helped me feel a little bit better in the moment. But I would have been unable to do that unless I was able to shift my thinking around what a negative emotion means.

And so this is what I want to talk to you about today. I've talked a lot on the podcast about the perception, the thoughts we have about our negative emotions, but today I want to talk about how we cope with these negative emotions, the actions that we take in response to them. And specifically, what it means to numb how you feel.

Because the action of numbing is how I coped with my negative emotions for a very long time. I found whatever I could in my external environment to try to help me cover up how I was feeling. Now, numbing is any behavior,

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any action that helps you avoid experiencing a negative emotion, and while it may help you in the short term, I promise there are long-term consequences.

And if you're not familiar with this idea, this concept of numbing, you probably can relate to the idea of feeling like you need to take the edge off, wanting to turn your brain off, wanting to zone out or tune out or check out or buffer. All of these things are numbing. All of these things describe wanting to go unconscious, wanting to escape how you are feeling.

And now listen, a lot of you do this right now by pouring yourself a drink. But the truth is you can numb yourself with anything. Numbing looks like overeating, overworking, overspending, over-watching, over-exercising, over-Facebooking. There are a million ways that humans have discovered to try and dull a feeling, to try to cover up a negative emotion.

So what do we do? We fill up our lives with things we don't need, we try to escape from stress by rewarding ourselves with food. Usually too much and too fast. We over-schedule our lives to avoid having any moment alone with how we are feeling. We sit in front of a TV for hours on end, choosing to occupy our minds with what's in front of us so we don't have to feel the emotion inside of us.

And I'll tell you, it does not matter if it's alcohol or drugs or money or 80-hour workweeks or smoking or caffeine or sugar or online surfing. If you are using something in your external environment to habitually escape a negative emotion rather than just allowing yourself to experience it, you're numbing.

Now, I first encountered this concept in Brené Brown's work. It was actually this book called *The Gifts of Imperfection*, and if you haven't read it, you really should. It is a wonderful book. I remember picking up that book about a year after I had decided that I was going to take a break from drinking, but this time I was going to do it differently. I had taken lots of breaks in my life before. I had decided at many points in my life just to say no, but this time, I didn't sit down and say okay, I'm just never going to drink again.

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What I did was I promised myself that I was going to take a break from drinking until I could figure out why I needed a drink in certain situations and learn how not to need it. I focused on teaching my brain something different.

So I was on this path of self-discovery, which is how I came across Brené Brown and her work and this book. And I'll tell you, you know when you read something and it just stops you in your tracks? That is what happened to me. I can still vividly remember sitting in my apartment reading, I was on my bed, and encountering this one passage from the book that just - it like, broke open my entire world.

She wrote, "For me, it wasn't just the dancehalls, cold beer, and marble lights of my youth that got out of hand. It was banana bread, chips and queso, email, work, staying busy, incessant worrying, planning, perfectionism, and anything else that could dull those agonizing anxiety-fuelled feelings of vulnerability."

I remember reading that and it was like a lightning bolt went through me because I just thought, "Oh my god, that's me." This is exactly what I do. Yes, it is a problem, the habit that I have around drinking, but it's not limited to drinking. Because every time I would take a break from drinking, and you know I flip-flopped a lot, I would watch the same thing happen.

So I would no longer have alcohol to escape the uncomfortable emotions that I was unaccustomed to handling on my own, so what would I do? Well, unknowingly, I would turn to other things to try to cope with how I was feeling. I would oversleep. I would start sleeping too much because if you're asleep, you don't have to feel a negative emotion. I would overeat, I would compulsively exercise. I would binge on TV when I wasn't working really crazy hours at work.

I didn't understand it at the time, but my brain was trying to help me. Because the truth was I had no idea how to handle negative emotions other than running from them or covering them up. And so my brain was just trying to find anything and everything that it could to distract myself from

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how I was feeling on the inside. And it took me a while to realize what I was doing and to realize how all of these activities were actually connected to my overdrinking. But I realized that what they all had in common was that I was numbing my emotions.

And you know what? Once I realized that connection, it was like a weight lifted off my shoulders. At that point, I suddenly recognized that what I was struggling with was so much bigger than just what I was drinking or how much I was drinking. And you know what? That actually felt like a relief.

And at that point, I didn't know how I was going to learn how to cope with my emotions differently. I didn't have a plan. But I had a destination. I knew that I had to get to a place where I had to learn how to sit with the things that made me so uncomfortable that I would rather drink or eat or work or sleep or do anything other than feel them.

Because I was an expert at distraction, at numbing, at dulling, at taking the edge off of how I was feeling. And you know what? Taking that break and deciding to go on that path of self-discovery taught me that. And it was good news and the bad news. The bad news was taking a break could only help me so much. Yes, when I was taking a break from drinking, I no longer had these hangovers, I didn't have to wake up the next day from a big night out and think, "God, what happened?" I didn't have to cringe at my behavior from the night before.

But I was still struggling with all these negative emotions. I was still struggling with how I felt on the inside. So that was the bad news. But the good news was that once I learned about this idea of numbing, suddenly, I knew where I had to end up. I knew that my real work, if I wanted to ever change this habit, and not only the habit of overdrinking but overeating, overworking, oversleeping, over-spending, I had to learn how to feel my emotions.

Now, if you're familiar with Brené Brown, she focuses her work on vulnerability. And you know what? I didn't understand it at the time but now I can see that vulnerability really goes hand in hand with the

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willingness to experience your negative emotions. And I'll tell you, the skill of vulnerability is so misunderstood.

So many people think that vulnerability is a weakness. But it's not a weakness. It is simple the practice and skill of showing up as your complete human self no matter what is there. It is being present as you truly are right now. And of course, what don't we want to be present with? What do we want to hide from? Well, it's our negative emotions. Our anger, our insecurities, our inadequacies, our awkwardness, our loneliness, our anxieties.

What we don't want to be present with is how we are feeling. And this is where numbing comes in. It is our unconscious search for anything and everything that will help us avoid experiencing how we are feeling.

And listen, this is why learning how to coach yourself, understanding the think-feel-act cycle, teaching yourself a different way to cope with negative emotions instead of pouring a drink or opening a bag of chips is so incredibly powerful because it is this amazing metaskill. Society treats drinking too much as if it is this unique problem, siloed all by itself. When in reality, it's nothing more than an extension of the many, many ways that the brain finds to cope with how we're feeling.

No one ever sat you down, no one ever sat me down and said, "Hey, this is a negative emotion, it's not a problem. It's not an emergency. In fact, it's not even a sign that anything has gone wrong. It's normal. It's healthy. You're supposed to feel them. You're not supposed to be happy all the time. There's nothing to fix when you feel these emotions. It's just an opportunity to look at your thoughts and decide what is and is not serving you."

So there are two important things I want you to remember. Number one, everybody numbs. This fact alone is what dissolved so much shame that I had about my drinking. Because as soon as I understood that numbing was this universal coping mechanism that the brain turns to, and that's what was behind the habit of drinking, was my desire to find a substance that could change how I felt, it really started to help me chip away from this idea

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that my overdrinking was a sign that something was wrong with me or that I was broken.

And two, listen, there is no morally right or correct way to cope with an emotion. So I know some of you out there may be wondering, okay, is it a problem if I pour myself a glass of wine when I'm stressed or when I make a Ben & Jerry's run when I'm feeling sad? And I'm going to tell you this: no, it is not a problem.

As long as when you are turning to alcohol or food or shopping or working or whatever it is as a coping mechanism, as long as you walk away feeling great after that activity, then there's no need to stop. But if not, and let me tell you, when this will happen is when it becomes a repeated habit, if you're not feeling great, you might want to examine how and why you are using these behaviors to hide from how you are feeling.

My question is always the same. Do you like the results you're getting? And if your method of taking the edge off helping you or creating a new set of problems to deal with? Are you ultimately having to deal with hangovers or shame or weight gain or drained bank accounts or exhaustion or disconnection from your family? Because if that is happening, then you probably need to take a look at it.

This is what I call problem stalling as opposed to problem solving. Numbing is not helping you solve a problem. It is just temporarily covering up how you feel. So you are stalling the problem. You haven't done anything to alleviate the underlying issue, and on top of it, you've usually created a whole new set of negative consequences for yourself.

You know, it is really this Catch-22. We think that numbing makes us feel better, that pouring a drink or eating food or spending money when we are upset, when we have a negative emotion, we think it makes us feel better. But really, in the long run, it often does the opposite because that original problem is unchanged and now we've added new troubles to the mix. It really is a lose-lose proposition.

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So there are two signs that I really want you to pay attention to that are indications that an activity you are engaging in may be numbing. One, do you notice yourself habitually wanting to escape how you are feeling? Here's how it shows up: you feel like I want to turn my brain off, I don't want to think anymore. I'll hear people tell me, "Well, I just have an overactive mind."

You know, this is a really interesting concept because I hear people say this a lot. I just have an overactive mind. Now that you understand the think-feel-act cycle and that your thoughts create your feelings, you can see that having a lot of thoughts is never a problem. It's having a lot of negative thoughts, that's when there is a problem. Because if you have negative thoughts, you're having negative emotions, negative feelings.

Think about it. If you had a lot of positive thoughts, if you had an overactive mind with a lot of positive thoughts in there, it would not be something you were trying to run from. So that's the first thing to pay attention to. Do you habitually notice yourself wanting to escape from how you are feeling?

Now, the second sign is does your desire to take the edge off feel urgent? So this is the case if you find yourself thinking, "I need that drink now." You got to have it now, and when you have that drink, it goes down quickly and you are immediately ready for more. Speed is a really good sign that you may be numbing.

And there's a reason why. I'll tell you, when we want to cover up how we're feeling, a single drink is not going to flip a switch on a negative emotion, and that's true of really anything. One bowl of ice cream, one TV show, one glass of wine, it's not going to flip an immediate switch. That is why you find this desire to go back for more and more.

The less tolerable that you find an emotion, the more you will want to get rid of it as soon as possible, and that takes quantity. So if you notice one or both of these signs, well, what are you going to do? You have to start questioning why you are turning to these activities in order to feel better. And the best way that I know how to do this is to consider that the desire to

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take the edge off, whether it's reaching for a drink or heading to the fridge or scrolling through your phone, whatever it is, these actions are a signal for you to pay attention.

You know, what happens is that we're so used to focusing on the behavior that we want to change, we're so used to putting all our energy to I got to change my drinking, I got to change my drinking, I got to change my eating, I got to change my spending, that it is so easy to miss why these behaviors become habitual in the first place. And that's what happened to me. For so long, my focus was just on how much I was drinking or how much I was eating or how much I was spending instead of why I was having problems with these behaviors in the first place.

And there is a really powerful question that you can ask yourself around any behavior that you suspect may be connected to numbing a negative emotion. The places in your life where you are numbing, whatever it is, whenever you are trying to cover up your emotions, you are clouding the voice of your soul. Your soul has a message for you every time you reach for a drink or food or your wallet or your phone. Whatever your activity of choice is. Your job is to listen to that message and discover what it is.

What is your soul trying to tell you? When you find yourself wanting to escape, take the edge off, zone out, dull, go unconscious, turn your mind off, there's a message in there for you if you're willing to listen.

It may be I'm really lonely and I need connection or I'm feeling so anxious and I need reassurance, I'm angry and I need a release, I'm insecure, I need a little compassion, or I'm afraid and I need courage. There are messages there but you will not be able to hear any of them if you are doing what I did for so long, which is constantly numbing the negative emotions that you feel.

You have to be willing to feel them. Not only that, but as long as you are numbing, you cannot start the process of understanding why you feel the way you do and how to start to shift to a different place. You cannot watch that think-feel-act cycle unfold if you are constantly trying to go

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unconscious. You have to be present with who you are and what you are feeling right now. Otherwise, that cycle will always stay hidden to you.

So this week, I want you to start here. If you suspect that you may be numbing, just ask yourself, when you notice yourself reaching for a drink, what do I really need right now? What is the message for me behind the desire to numb? Those questions can change everything for you.

Alright, I'll be back next week. And again, if you are interested in finding out more about the live version that I'm offering later this month of the six-week solution, head on over to rachelhart.com/live. You can sign up there for updates and I will let you know as soon as I have more details. Alright everybody, have a wonderful, wonderful day.

Hey guys, if you're finding this podcast helpful, and I really hope you are, I would love if you would head on over to iTunes and leave a review. And as a special thank you, I've updated and expanded my free urge meditation giveaway. I've created two audio meditations plus a brand-new workbook that will teach you a different way to respond to the urge to drink. The meditations are super simple. All it takes is five minutes and a pair of headphones. And each one now comes with a follow-up exercise in the workbook to help you dig deeper and really retrain your brain when it comes to the habit of drinking. So after you leave a review on iTunes, all you need to do is head on over to rachelhart.com/urge, input your information, and I'll make sure you get a copy of both meditations plus the workbook in your inbox.

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.