

Ep #99: You Are Not Powerless



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With Your Host

Rachel Hart

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Ep #99: You Are Not Powerless

You are listening to the *Take A Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, episode 99.

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.

Well hello, everybody. We are talking about one of my favorite topics today. It is one that is, I think, kind of controversial. It comes up a lot around the habit of drinking. And it is the idea of being powerless.

Now, in society, we are all pretty much fed this idea that either you are a, quote en quote, normal drinker, or you're an alcoholic. It's a very black and white picture and there is no in between. Of course, I don't agree with this, but it's a very common refrain that you hear.

And on top of that, a really common idea is that if you drink too much, the only way to change is to admit that you are powerless. It is an essential step in the 12-step process.

Now, I'm going to tell you, this idea never resonated with me. When I was drinking more than I wanted to, when I was totally stuck in the habit and I didn't know how to get out of it. I didn't know how to change. I still could not connect with the idea that I didn't have power.

And I will tell you that a lot of people who find my work and a lot of people who write to me and people who I work with will say, one of the biggest components that they resonate with is the idea that they also don't believe that they're powerless. It never sat right with them.

And I think, for starters, it's because it doesn't fit a lot of people's experiences. It didn't fit my experience. Sometimes I was responsible when I was drinking and sometimes I was drinking way too much. I couldn't make sense of it. But if I was powerless, how would I have had these two experiences?

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #99: You Are Not Powerless

And I really did just feel incredibly strongly that if I was going to change my drinking, if I was going to figure this out, I had to be empowered, not powerless. A lot of you listening really resonate with this idea that you're not powerless.

But here's the thing; I see this happen so often with my clients. I will start working with someone and they will tell me how much they do not connect with the idea of being powerless, and then they will start saying things to me that sound an awful lot like being powerless. So I will hear them say, "I don't know why I decided to drink. I think the habit just takes over." Or, "I don't know why I drink too much. I guess I must have an addictive personality." Or, "I don't know why it's hard not to drink; I just can't seem to say no."

Listen closely to this language. The habit just takes over. I must have an addictive personality. I just can't say no. It all sounds an awful lot like being powerless; like alcohol is in charge instead of you.

Now, the think-feel-act cycle tells you the opposite. It tells you that there is always a decision to drink – always – and alcohol is not making that decision for you. It just sits there. You are making that decision.

Now, you may not know the thought or the feeling that is driving the decision to drink right now. That's okay, I didn't at first either. But unless someone is holding you down and pouring alcohol into your mouth, it didn't just end up in your system. You made the decision to drink.

And you may not like the decision, especially the next day. The next day, you may really regret it. And you may not even know why you are making it over and over again when clearly you don't like the repercussions, but it is still a decision that you are making. It is still a choice.

And yes, it is still a decision, even once you have started drinking. I'm not just talking about the decision to take that very first sip and then all decisions are out the window.

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #99: You Are Not Powerless

So I know a lot of you right now are thinking, “Well what about people who are truly addicted to alcohol? What about them?” And I will tell you this; yes, it is 100% possible for your body to become physically dependent on alcohol. And what I mean, when you are physically dependent, you become ill without it. You suffer tremors and shakiness and sweating when you’re not drinking.

If that is the case for you, it is something you really need to pay attention to. It is a sign that your body is dependent on alcohol and you may need medical attention. But my question for you right now is, does that describe your situation?

If it does, by all means, go see a doctor. By all means, get medical attention. But if it doesn’t – if your body is not becoming physically ill without alcohol, it is time for you to explore what you truly think about being powerless, what you truly think about the decision, what you truly think about the habit and whether or not you are actually in charge or whether or not you’re telling yourself that alcohol is in charge.

So I want to break down the three common arguments that I hear from people. And keep in mind that I used all of these myself; all of them. So that first one is, “I don’t know why I decided to drink. The habit just takes over.”

Now, let’s talk about habits. Habits are what make humans so efficient. They help the brain save energy, and the brain loves to save energy. Habits allow us to go on autopilot. So we learn habits through repetition. We repeat something over and over again until it basically becomes unconscious; we can take an action without really thinking about it, but the thought is still there.

So maybe that’s pouring a drink when you get home from work or using a glass of wine to take the edge off of anxiety. Now, habits will take hold more quickly when there is a reward, particularly when there is a concentrated reward, like the reward that alcohol delivers.

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #99: You Are Not Powerless

But just because something becomes a habit, does not mean that you are doomed to follow it blindly forever. And there are two reasons for this; one, you still have free will. You can still decide what you want to do. You can still make decisions. And two, because of the human brain that you have – you have a prefrontal cortex, you have a part of your brain that you can actually direct to observe what is happening. You can direct it to bring consciousness to something that feels totally unconscious. And what you are bringing your awareness to is simply the think-feel-act cycle – the thought and the feeling before you take the action of drinking.

Now, I know some of you will tell me, “There’s no thought there. I swear, Rachel, there’s no thought.” And I used to feel this way too. It can feel like the decision to drink just happens. But just because you can’t yet see the thought, just because you haven’t yet identified it, doesn’t mean it’s not there.

Your actions, all your actions in the world, not just the action of drinking, are not driven by some mysterious unknowable force. Everything you do or don’t do in life, and I mean everything, is a result of what you are feeling and what you are thinking. That’s why the think-feel-act cycle is so powerful as a tool to master, because it explains everything.

Habits are challenging to change and to replace because we don’t understand how they work. Nobody ever explains to us the think-feel-act cycle. Nobody ever explains to us what is behind the actions that we take or don’t take. No one ever explains cues or how our brain is constantly searching our environment to memorize and remember, “Where did I get that last reward?”

It’s looking at times and places and people and feelings and sounds to remember, “How do I know when to start this habit?” No one ever explains how to cope with negative emotions. Nobody ever tells you what to do when you feel anxious or lonely or bored or awkward or insecure, and so your brain does the best that it knows how. It looks to find things in your environment to cover up how you feel. In short, it starts numbing.

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #99: You Are Not Powerless

I want you to never tell yourself, “I don’t know what happened. The habit just took over.” Tell yourself instead, “I decided to drink.” Even if you don’t like that decision in retrospect, “I decided to drink.” And then once you tell yourself that, you can look for the thought and the feeling driving that decision.

Now, the quickest way to find it is to say no to a drink and then watch that toddler inside of you, watch that lower-brain freak out. Trust me, your thoughts and feelings will immediately start to surface. You are not powerless. You are not at the mercy of habits. You have the gift of consciousness.

You can choose to focus your attention and your awareness to the things that you do. It is called mindfulness. And to be mindful is just the ability to be fully present with what you are doing. You have to direct your brain to be fully attentive to whatever is happening.

And you know what – it sounds really simple, but in a world of constant distractions, being mindful really is a challenging practice. That doesn’t mean you can’t learn it. It is a skill of staying fully in the here and now. Being present takes practice. It’s like going to the gym for your mind.

But because you have a human brain, you are uniquely equipped to understand and change the habit. So that first excuse, “I don’t know why I decided to drink, the habit just takes over...” do not fall into that trap.

Alright, let’s look at the second excuse I hear a lot, “I don’t know why I drink too much. I guess I just have an addictive personality.” Now, in episode 88, I talked all about the difference between personality and mindset. And if you haven’t listened, I really encourage you to go back and listen because it really does matter to understand the difference between these two things.

I will hear people all the time – and I used to say this myself, that I couldn’t change something in my life because it was just who I was. It was just my personality. I’m just someone who needs everything to be perfect. I’m just someone who wants everything to be fair. I’m just someone who can’t relax

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #99: You Are Not Powerless

in social settings. I'm just someone who's disorganized. I'm just someone who's always been shy or always been anxious.

So I used to describe myself in this way too. I used to talk about things that weren't serving me as if they were just parts of my personality. So I would find the things that were wrong with me and then I would turn them into personality traits.

And I said all the time, "I'm just someone who always wants more. I'm never satisfied." So I would explain that around my drinking, I would use that to explain how much I ate, "I'm just someone who always wants more. I'm just someone who's hard on herself. I was just born that way; hard on myself. I'm just someone who drinks too much..." even that, "I'm just someone who drinks too much; just part of my personality."

The problem is that when you describe yourself in terms of your problems as if they are a part of your personality, it makes change seem impossible. "I was born that way. That's just who I am. I've always been like that."

And sometimes we even point to our families as evidence that we can't change, "Well, my mom's like that too. So is my sister. So is my dad. They're all like that." Now, listen, I do believe that people are born with different personalities. But I also don't think that whatever natural tendencies and characteristics that we may be born with, these personality traits, I don't think they are set in stone. You have the ability to show up differently and to choose how you want to show up.

I think most of you are unknowingly describing your, quote en quote, personality, when what you really mean is, "I have a bunch of think-feel-act cycles going on in my head and I have no idea that they're there. I have no idea that I should even question them. I have never considered that my thoughts were optional. I've never been told or taught that I could choose to think different things on purpose. I've just been thinking them over and over and these habitual thought patterns produce feelings and those feelings drive actions that I have then interpreted as that's just my personality."

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #99: You Are Not Powerless

You don't have an addictive personality. What you have are a lot of permission-giving thoughts that you use unconsciously to justify your drinking. I call it the rolodex of excuses. Your brain just will flip through one excuse after another after another until it finds one that you believe, "Who cares? Why not? One won't hurt. One more won't hurt. It doesn't matter. I deserve it. Screw it."

So your brain feels the urge to drink or to eat or to spend or to shop or to Facebook and you say yes over and over again because you are listening to the rolodex of excuses. You react to that urge because no one has ever showed you how not to. No one ever taught you that urges are not an emergency and that the more you react, the more you say yes, the more entrenched the habit will become, the more unconscious the think-feel-act cycle will become. So it becomes difficult in that moment to see the thought and feeling driving the decision, but you can start learning how to bring awareness to it.

I truly believed that I had an addictive personality. I truly believed that I was just someone who couldn't say no, I was just someone who always wanted more, who smoked really fast and drank really fast and ate really fast and I chalked it all up to this addictive personality that I was so sure that I had. Which is kind of crazy because it's totally at odds with my belief that I wasn't powerless.

When you tell yourself that you have an addictive personality, you're essentially telling yourself that there is a part of you that is unchangeable, because that's how we see our personality. It's just who we are.

So when you tell yourself you have an addictive one, it's like saying, "I don't know, I was just dealt this crappy hand. I just got this crappy addictive personality, so now I'm kind of out of luck. The deck is stacked against me."

There is no such thing as an addictive personality. There is no set of character traits that makes someone more susceptible to drinking more than they want or doing anything more than they want.

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #99: You Are Not Powerless

Unfortunately, we have been indoctrinated with a lot of backwards thinking about people who drink too much or people who do anything, any kind of activity that doesn't serve them. We're told that it's a character defect. We're told that the people who do this, they prioritize pleasure over everything, including their own wellbeing and the wellbeing of their loved ones, that they're selfish and they're manipulators and they're liars and that people who drink too much have something wrong with their character.

That's what we're told, but the truth is that every single human on this planet has a brain that was designed to seek out and prioritize rewards. Humans learned how to survive by seeking out rewards in the environment. Rewards are an incredibly powerful piece of human survival, because thousands of years ago, in order to survive in the world, humans needed to maximize contact with beneficial things and minimize contact with harm.

It seems really obvious. You've got to find pleasure and avoid pain. But how did the brain learn to do it? The answer is your brain has a built-in reward system. So you encounter something that helps survival and your brain gets a little bit of dopamine. Your brain thinks, "Hey, that felt good. Let's remember to do this again."

Being rewarded by dopamine helped humans learn what to eat and what to avoid and how to stay warm and how to procreate and how to stay safe from predators. You know, in short, your brain uses dopamine to remember things that are good for survival.

Now, here's the problem; all of us have that brain. But nowadays, human survival is way less dire. Most of us are not waking up and wondering if we're going to actually survive, if we're going to be able to meet our needs today. And two, we live in this reward-saturated environment.

So there is social media everywhere, where we get likes and hearts and thumbs-up. And there's on-demand shopping and on-demand TV and there's limitless pornography and there is sugary highly processed food and there is lots and lots of alcohol that is relatively inexpensive and plentiful, and guess what, super-sized everything else.

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #99: You Are Not Powerless

Your brain hasn't caught up. It still wants to seek out rewards in its environment because it thinks it is helping you. It is still operating under the same belief that its goal is to maximize pleasure and minimize pain and it does that with its built-in reward system.

But nowadays, the pain that most people encounter is emotional pain. It's boredom, it's loneliness, it's anxiety and stress and insecurity. And your brain uses a drink to solve it because it thinks it's being helpful.

You don't have an addictive personality. You have a brain that was built to create habits and to seek out rewards and a brain that takes action based on what you are feeling and what you are thinking. Now, I know that some of you will say, "Well wait a minute, but aren't there genetic predispositions that can play a role in all of this?"

And I will tell you, yeah, sure. I think that there are genetic predispositions that may play a role. There's no one gene that determines whether or not someone is going to drink too much. But more than that, your genes are not your destiny.

Most of you have confused predisposed with predetermined. Your fate is not sealed. You have free will, and not only that, you can learn how to change your habits if you are given the information. You are not doomed to follow them blindly forever. You can learn how to bring awareness to something that your brain would prefer to keep unconscious.

So I know now that some of you are saying, "Okay fine, I make the decision to drink and fine, I guess I don't have an addictive personality. But listen, once I start, I can't stop." But before I even dive into that, because that is the third most common thing I hear people tell me, let's just put that thought into the think-feel-act cycle.

Once I start, I can't stop. That's a thought. What is it going to create for you? What feeling? You're going to feel pretty powerless when you think that. And when you feel powerless, what do you do? How do you show up? Are you taking a lot of action? I don't think so.

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #99: You Are Not Powerless

Your brain is probably just looking for a lot of evidence that it's true, that once you start, you can't stop. Just be aware of what that creates in the think-feel-act cycle for you and ask yourself, is that a helpful thought to be thinking?

So the third thing that I hear from people is, "I don't know why it's hard not to drink. I just can't say no." Or, "Once I start, I can't stop." Now, I want you to answer this question; do you always drink the same amount? Do you always polish off every bit of alcohol in your home? Do you always go out and drink until you pass out?

And if you answer no to these questions, well how come? Why is that possible? If alcohol is in charge, why wouldn't you always be drinking the same amount? Why wouldn't you always just keep drinking until there wasn't any alcohol left? Why wouldn't you drink until the point of passing out all the time?

Because you're making a decision to stop. Now listen, you may be making a decision to stop sometimes later than you would like; it's still a decision. If alcohol were in charge, if alcohol was running the show, why would your drinking ever look different? Why would you sometimes be, quote en quote, responsible and just have a glass and sometimes polish off the bottle?

How would that happen if alcohol was in charge? If alcohol was always running the show, wouldn't you always just keep drinking? The only explanation for why there is a difference is because you decide sometimes to say no and you decide other times to say, "Let's keep going." It's as simple as that.

You have thoughts that are driving your decision-making even once you have started drinking. And they can be as simple as, "I don't drink more than a bottle." Or, "I can't let the last little bit go to waste." You might think, "I would never finish a bottle. I'll drink everything except that last glass in there." Or you might think, "I don't drink by myself." Or, "I'll drink if you're having another."

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #99: You Are Not Powerless

I always think back to something that happened to me when I was in my 20s. I was out drinking one Friday with a very good friend of mine, and I think we had gotten off work early that day for some reason and I was probably three or four drinks in. I was drunk.

And the rate at which things were going, this was going to be a long night. I was just going to keep at it. And I remember that my phone rang and my sister was on the other end and she was incredibly upset. She had just gotten some pretty devastating news.

And at this point, I was living in New York, she was living in DC, and there was just no question in my mind that I wasn't going to sit at this bar and keep drinking. I had to get to her. It didn't matter that I had plans with this friend. It didn't matter that I was at a bar. It didn't matter that I was drunk.

Right then and there, I told my friend, "Listen, I've got to go." And I went home and I booked a flight and I headed straight to LaGuardia, straight to fly down to DC to see her.

Now, if alcohol was in charge, how would that have been possible? I stopped because I had a really compelling reason, even when I was drunk. I had a reason that I needed to go get to my sister. And the truth was, there were lots of times when I wasn't stopping drinking, I would keep going.

I would drink way past three drinks or way past four drinks because I had different thoughts in those moments, "Who cares? One more won't hurt. It doesn't matter. I'll have another." In that moment, when my sister was upset, I just thought, I have to get to her. And it was so compelling that I stopped.

It didn't matter how much I had been drinking. In other moments when I was drinking, I would think something entirely different, "Who cares? Why not? One more won't hurt." And in those moments, these thoughts were compelling and they had me pick up another glass. Either way, my thoughts were driving the decision about how much I drank or when I stopped.

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #99: You Are Not Powerless

And it explained why my drinking didn't always look the same, because I was having different thoughts in the moment. If you tell yourself you can't say no or you can't stop once you start, you are literally creating the feeling of being powerless.

Put all those thoughts in the think-feel-act cycle. What do they generate for you? Do they make you feel empowered or do they make you feel helpless? This is really what it all boils down to. When you tell yourself, "I don't know why I decided to drink; the habit just takes over." Or, "I don't know why I drank too much. It must be because I have an addictive personality." Or, "I don't know why it's hard not to drink, I just can't seem to say no..." what you are doing is abdicating responsibility, plain and simple.

That's what I did for so many years. I kept telling myself that alcohol was in charge even though at the same time I hated the idea of being powerless and even though, of course, that wasn't even true. And guess what – I did this with so many things, and I bet that you are too.

I don't know why I eat so much. I don't know why I can't reign in my spending. I don't know why I can't pull myself away from Facebook or Netflix... because you're making decisions, that's why. Because the moment you take responsibility for the decisions you make, for your actions, there's nothing left to blame but you. That's why it feels uncomfortable to fully accept that you are the one making these decisions.

When you step into a place of being 100% accountable for your actions, it's kind of scary. And trust me, because I know. It kind of freaked me out. But it was also the moment where I got all my power. It was the moment where true freedom really came to me because once you see that you and your thoughts are what is truly behind the decision to drink, then you can go about changing it. Then you step into all your power. You're not powerless, no matter what your brain is trying to tell you.

Alright, everybody, that's all for this week. I will see you next week for episode 100. Bye, everybody

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #99: You Are Not Powerless

Have you changed your drinking but still feel like something is missing in life? Then you are ready to go in pursuit of a life that blows your mind. I am accepting applications now for an exclusive year-long coaching program that will give you the blueprint to let go of insecurity, anxiety, self-doubt, and to once and for all stop feeling like you need to fix yourself because it is so worth it to create a life that is way bigger and way better than what's in your glass. If you're interested, head on over to rachelhart.com/inpursuit to apply.

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.