

Ep #151: Urge Fuel



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Rachel Hart

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Ep #151: Urge Fuel

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Welcome to the *Take A Break* podcast with Rachel Hart. If you're 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.

Hey guys. We are going to talk about urge fuel today. I've been thinking a lot about the concept of fueling your urges, and I will tell you, it is the exact opposite of what you want to do. You don't want to fuel your urges. You don't want to stoke them. You don't want to make them bigger. You want to extinguish them.

And I love thinking about the concept of urges and your desire as if they are a fire inside of you. I think in part because I spent my summers growing up going to Girl Scout camp, and I learned at a young age how to build a fire and how to go through the woods and collect tinder and kindling and fire wood and how to keep the fire going.

And it's such a great analogy to think about how you are keeping the fire going within yourself inadvertently and how that is getting in the way of success when it comes to changing your drinking. Because fires need fuel. Without fuel, the fire is going to burn out.

And the same is true for your urges. But there is a slight understanding that you need to have, a slight kind of mindset change that you need to have because most people think that the fuel for your desire or the fuel for your urges comes from the substance itself. So that's what I really want to dive into today.

I'll tell you that the more you fuel the urge to drink, the more that it will grow. And the more that it grows, the more desire you will have, the more

Ep #151: Urge Fuel

urges you will have. And if your desire is left unchecked, that's when your desire for the substance can crowd out everything else in your life.

Then suddenly, drinking or eating or spending money, whatever it is for you, becomes the most important thing. And that's when you get into the realm of addiction. Suddenly, nothing is more important to you than the object of your desire. And you will choose it over your health, you will choose it over your safety, you will choose it over your security. It doesn't matter.

But listen, you don't get to that point overnight. That doesn't happen in one fell swoop. There are a lot of steps along the way. And one of those pieces is for you to understand what truly is fueling your urges when it comes to alcohol or anything that you find yourself overdoing.

You have to understand how you are actually stoking that urge, stoking that fire inside of yourself. And when you understand this, this is when not only will you regain authority over your urges, but this is how you can change your desire. The thing that so many of you want and also kind of at the same time are thinking, can I really do that?

That's what I thought for a very long time. I didn't want to want alcohol or food or cigarettes or chocolate, or all the things that I tended to overdo. I didn't want to want them so much. But I also wasn't really sure that I could change my desire. It didn't seem possible.

Now, if you've listened to the podcast for a while, if you've read my book, *Why Can't I Drink Like Everyone Else*, you know that in my 20s, I flip-flopped back and forth with drinking and not drinking. I took my first break from drinking shortly after my 22nd birthday, and then I took many breaks, too many to count, over that entire decade.

And here was the thing that drove me nuts. Alcohol just had this pull over me. It was like my desire wasn't changing, even when I was taking a break.

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

Ep #151: Urge Fuel

Yes, I loved waking up and not feeling hungover. I loved waking up and not having to worry about what I did or said the night before. There were a lot of health benefits and upsides, but deep down, I still really wanted to drink. I still really wished that I could.

Because that's what I was always telling myself. You can't. When I was on a break, that was the language that I used with myself. You can't drink. You are not allowed to drink. But I was also internally having thought processes about how I really wanted to and how I wished that I could and how it would make things better and how it would be more normal, more acceptable.

And I had all this desire, even though I wasn't drinking. It's so interesting. It wasn't interesting at the time. At the time I felt very frustrated by it, but now I see how interesting it is that it wasn't just alcohol that created my desire because I had a lot of desire even when I wasn't drinking.

Now, the reason why we think this happen, why we can have a lot of desire for something like alcohol, and then stop consuming it and still have that desire is because we believe and we are taught incorrectly that desire is fixed. And so you will know this because you will hear yourself or you will hear other people say things like, "I'm just someone who really loves to drink. I'm just someone who really loves chocolate. I'm just someone who loves to shop. I was just born without an off switch and I always overdo it."

You will hear that kind of language that all suggests that desire is something that is fixed. And so when you believe that the desire to drink or the desire to eat or the desire to spend money is this inherent part of you, part of who you are, then of course, you see it as unchangeable. But that's never the case.

You have so much power to change your desire, except no one ever teaches you how. No one even shows you that it's a possibility. Now, people will ask me a lot, they'll say, "Okay well, that's all fine and good but

Ep #151: Urge Fuel

what about genetics? What about family history? Doesn't that all play a role?"

And sure, it can. I think that family history and the environment in which you were raised and the coping mechanisms that you saw growing up can of course all play a role in the development of habits that you later form. But it's important to understand that there's no gene that determines whether or not you're going to find yourself drinking too much or eating too much or spending too much one day.

That is really crucial. I think the problem is when people focus too much on family history, they end up feeling defeated. You'll see it play out in the think-feel-act cycle. When their thoughts really focus on, "Well, my mother drank a lot, or my father drank a lot, or my grandparents were alcoholics," you'll see that the emotion created when they spend a lot of time thinking there is defeat. It's hopelessness.

It's like, well, it's baked into my DNA so what am I going to do? This is just who I am. I can't change who my mother was. I can't change who my father was or my grandparents. The problem with this is that it ignores the role of free will, of choice, of the ability for the human brain to rewire itself and learn new things.

I'm going to tell you this; if someone in your family struggled with alcohol or struggled with drugs or struggled with food or whatever it was, in all likelihood, whoever that person was, your mother, your father, your grandparents, uncles, cousins, if you point to them as being the reason for your current struggle, what you are forgetting is that in all likelihood, they did not have any of the tools that I am teaching you about how to manage your mind.

They have the model of if you drink too much, it's a moral failing. If you drink too much, it's a character defect, which now we know, just by understanding how the think-feel-act cycle works and understanding that

Ep #151: Urge Fuel

our thoughts create our feelings, which then drive our actions, they drive our decisions, what we say yes and what we say no to, understanding that, we now see how that approach, this idea of drinking too much, being a moral failing, is totally at odds with change.

It doesn't create feelings, it doesn't lead to actions that actually lend themselves to sustainable change. Because the truth is your desire isn't fixed. You can learn to change it. And if you are currently over-desiring something, it has nothing to do about who you are or your character, and frankly, I don't think you should spend a lot of time thinking about your family history, unless that makes you feel good. Unless you feel empowered thinking about that.

But it has to do with what your brain is learning and how habits are formed. So let's just talk about in detail what fuels urges. The first is really obvious. The object of your desire is fuel for the urge. So if your desire is for alcohol, if you have the urge to drink and then you say yes to that desire, the alcohol that you drink then fuels the urge.

Now, I want to talk a little bit about how this actually happens. I talk a lot about how the brain, the human brain was designed to seek out and find pleasure in the environment. Because finding pleasure is a mechanism that helped humans learn how to survive.

So things like eating and having sex, they feel pleasurable, but more importantly, they helped with survival. Evolution encouraged us to do more of these things because eating and having sex, well, that's how the species survives. So the immediate encouragement that we get, because we're not really concerned about hey, is this species going to survive? That's not what we're thinking about on a day-to-day basis.

What we're thinking about is, hey, can I do something that feels good? And these things feel good. So there is a part of your brain, of every human brain, the lower brain, that is concerned about survival. And that part of

Ep #151: Urge Fuel

you, because it's concerned about survival, is also concerned about finding rewards. Finding those rewards and doing it efficiently. As easily as possible. Not expending a lot of energy. Making it as habitual, as automatic as possible.

And I will tell you this; for most of human history, the human brain's reward system matched our external environment perfectly. So rewards were scarce. They took a fair amount of energy to obtain them. But then about 5000 years ago, humans learned how to manipulate naturally occurring rewards in the environment.

We learned how to take the reward that you get from eating a grape, because you do get a reward when you eat that grape, we took that kind of small reward and we made it many, many, many times stronger by learning how to manipulate a grape into wine.

Now, we did this with many things. But alcohol is one of the main things that I want you to focus on. And by the way, we continue to keep doing this. We continue to keep manipulating naturally occurring rewards to make them stronger.

Now, the problem with this of course is then the brain, that lower brain that sees rewards as a signal for this is going to help me survive, it doesn't understand that actually, no, you don't need alcohol to survive. It's not necessary. The fact that it produces a reward if not a byproduct of the environment. It's a byproduct of human manipulation.

Now listen, alcohol does occur naturally on this planet. It's a byproduct of fermentation. But what I'm saying is that humans learned to harness the reward on a much bigger scale. And it's a bigger reward than what the brain is used to. And so the lower brain thinks, "Aha, this is good. This is important for survival. It's a big reward. I need to remember it. I need to seek it out again."

Ep #151: Urge Fuel

But of course, it's not. You could go your entire life and never drink a drop of alcohol and your survival would not be in jeopardy. But unless you learn how to manage your lower brain, alcohol itself will fuel your desire because your brain has that built-in desire for rewards and alcohol is a big reward.

The more you drink, the more desire you will have. Because that lower brain will just keep saying, "Aha, this is really good. We should do this again. Let's repeat it." Now, you know that this is true. I think everyone knows in their own life, the more they drink, the more they want to drink. The more they eat chocolate, the more they want to eat chocolate. The more they spend money, the more they shop, the more they want to spend money and shop.

Desire perpetuates itself. Desire creates more desire. And so of course, alcohol is part of the equation or whatever your object of desire is for you. It is part of the equation. But here's the thing; how does that explain the decade for me in my 20s where I would take these long breaks from drinking and I still really wanted to drink?

I wasn't drinking, but I still had all this desire. If alcohol fuels desire, but I'm not consuming it, then what's going on? You know this isn't unique to me. You can probably think of someone in your life who maybe no longer drinks and yet really longs for it. Maybe they talk about the good old days. They really wished that they could.

You can see that it doesn't really matter how long it's been. You can still desire this thing that you're telling yourself you can't have. And this is where you really have to understand this piece of what is fuel for your urges if you want to change.

Because if you just tell yourself, "Well, shouldn't not drinking kill my desire?" You're really missing an important piece of the puzzle. Because yes, that is true, and also no, that is not true. It is true, the less that you drink, the less your brain will come to expect a reward.

Ep #151: Urge Fuel

So let's say you always drink when you get home from work. 5pm, you walk through the door, you head to the kitchen, you open up the bottle of wine, you pour yourself a glass. Your brain starts to expect that reward. So you start to have urges in anticipation of it being 5pm, or anticipation of you walking through the door.

Now, if you stop doing this for a considerable period of time, your brain will slowly stop having those urges. It will slowly learn, hey, I guess we're not doing this. I guess we don't pour a glass of wine when we come home from work at 5pm.

And the reason it will stop doing it is really simple. Because yes, your lower brain wants the reward, it mistakenly believes it's important for survival, but it also wants to be efficient and save energy. And calling out for something that it won't get, especially after repeated exposure that it's not going to get it, your lower brain will learn that's just inefficient. It's a waste of energy and it doesn't want to waste energy.

So simply saying no will start to extinguish some of your urges, but this is the important key. You really can fuel your urges even when you're not drinking. And you do this with the contents of your mind. This is the part that is most often overlooked.

You fuel your urges regardless of whether or not you're consuming the object of your desire with your thoughts. When you are thinking to yourself, "That looks so good. This is so unfair. Why do I have to say no? I want one too. I just want to have this and be normal." Whatever your internal dialogue sounds like, that's what matters so much. That's what ends up being fuel for your urges and fuel for your desire.

Think about what happens when you are around other people who are drinking and you are not. What thoughts appear for you? What thoughts come up? You might have a pretty innocuous thought like, "I wish I could

Ep #151: Urge Fuel

too,” or, “This really isn’t as much fun. I’m not having as much fun as these people are having.”

Now listen, these thoughts might not seem like a big deal. They may just seem like you’re kind of reporting the news of what’s happening, what’s going on. But these thoughts are a big deal because they are like tinder for the fire. They are the very thing fueling your urges and fueling your desire and keeping it going.

You can think of it like the last little bits of fire in the fireplace. If you still have a couple embers glowing in there, and these thoughts that you think that seem so innocuous and not a big deal, it’s like they’re giving oxygen to the embers. So that the fire can start to grow again. You don’t even need to be consuming alcohol in order to do this.

Your words fuel your desire the way that oxygen fuels a fire. Your thoughts are the oxygen. Now, you might be thinking, “Okay, if that’s the case, if my thoughts, if my words, if they actually fuel my desire, then I just must stop thinking these thoughts. I just must put an end to them.”

But here’s a really key piece of the work that I teach when it comes to learning how to manage your mind. You cannot just force yourself to stop thinking a thought. You cannot also just slap on a new thought and be done. You have to start gradually moving to a more believable place.

The thoughts that you practice have to feel true. They have to be believable for your brain. If you’re thinking to yourself right now, “I wish I could drink,” or, “This isn’t going to be as much fun without a drink,” it will not help you to start walking around repeating to yourself, “I love not drinking. I love not drinking. I love not drinking.” Or, “I have an amazing time when I don’t drink.”

This will not help. The reason is because it feels fake. You don’t buy it. And thoughts that you don’t believe are still at work in the think-feel-act cycle.

Ep #151: Urge Fuel

They're just working to produce the feeling of disbelief. They're working to create skepticism or doubt or sometimes even cynicism.

Trying to practice a thought that doesn't feel true has the opposite effect. It actually is more fuel for your desire. Because then you're creating feeling more skeptical, more doubtful, more cynical than you were the moment before. You already have this suspicion. You're not entirely sure right now that you can change your desire.

That's okay. I was there too. But the more that you are thinking thoughts that create skepticism and doubt and make you feel kind of cynical, that is going to work against you. It's just creating more idea for the belief that it's impossible to change how you feel about alcohol. It actually backfires.

And so the trick really is to find a happy medium. Finding a new thought that doesn't add fuel to the fire, but also doesn't create more doubt or skepticism or disbelief for you. And that's where I use something called bridge thoughts.

I have a whole podcast, podcast number 75 that is all about bridge thoughts. And it's something that in my Take A Break program, I am teaching the women in there all the time how to start creating these new bridge thoughts, because this truly is how you take thought work from something that sounds like it makes a lot of sense to something that you can actually apply in your day-to-day life.

You have to be able to create new thoughts that are believable for you. And that's really what a bridge thought is. It's a believable shift in your thinking. It's a thought that opens the door just a little bit to a new possibility. A new way of seeing a situation.

It is not walking around telling yourself, "I'm not allowed to think that thought anymore," or walking around repeating a thought that you don't believe at all. Neither of those options will work.

Ep #151: Urge Fuel

So when you notice yourself thinking, “I wish I could drink,” one way to create a bridge thought is simply to ask yourself why. That’s interesting. I wonder why I wish I could drink right now. I wonder what my brain is telling me would be different or what would change.

Now, I guarantee, as soon as you start to do some of this inquiry to understand why it is you wish you could drink, in this moment or this situation, you’re going to find an emotion. You’re going to notice yourself saying, “Well, I would feel more relaxed or more at ease. Or I’d feel less restricted or more normal.”

And that is where your real work is if you want to sustainably change the habit. It’s figuring out what is blocking me from feeling relaxed or at ease, or what is creating restriction or separation for me right now. Because if you never change those things, that’s what’s really behind the habit. If you don’t change this piece of it, you of course will always be thinking to yourself, “Yeah, I wish I could drink.”

And you will be stuck there and it will not matter how much time you have under your belt because you’ll still be subtly providing oxygen and fuel to that fire. You have to start your work there, by creating a bridge thought of curiosity. That’s how you stop fueling your urges.

If you’re thinking that something will be less fun without a drink, that’s okay. Just ask yourself why. Start to do a little digging. I know this sounds so simple, but I promise you, it is what everyone overlooks. It is what I overlooked for so long.

What you’re overlooking is you’re not questioning your story of why it is you want to drink. You’re just treating it like a given. You’re walking around thinking to yourself, “Yeah, well of course everyone wants to, of course it makes things better.” That’s what I did. That’s what I was telling myself.

Ep #151: Urge Fuel

But challenging your story about the object of your desire is how you change your desire. Yes, taking a break, saying no can be a huge help. That is a huge piece of the work. But I don't ever want you to be in a situation that I was in, where I was taking a break, saying no, and still feeling all this desire. And then I felt like I was at war with myself, and that felt terrible.

So yes, alcohol does fuel your urges. The more you drink, the more desire you will have to drink more. And the same is true really for anything that gives your brain a reward. The more you eat chocolate, the more you will want to eat chocolate. The more you spend money, the more you will want to spend money.

Your brain is getting that reward and then thinking it's really important, and then wanting you to go seek out more of it. So yes, that is a piece that you must understand and you must take into account. But you cannot stop there. That piece is only one part of the equation.

You have to understand how your mind is perpetuating desire, even if you're not consuming the object of your desire. If you don't address your thoughts about alcohol, your thoughts about drinking, your thoughts about what it means for you not to drink, what it means about you as a person, it will not matter how long you say no for.

Because you will just be giving more oxygen to the fire. You'll be fueling your urges and fueling your desire and wondering why it is that you still want it. It's not because alcohol is inherently desirable. It's because your mind is currently giving that habit all the fuel it needs instead of working to extinguish it.

So that's what I want you to do. Pay attention to what you are thinking. The word that you have. They are the oxygen for your urges, for your desire. You got to cut that out. And you can do that just by being curious, just by

Ep #151: Urge Fuel

asking yourself why. Because that's where your work really is, to start to change the habit at a deeper level. Where it was really built.

I promise you this, the habit was not built on drinking. The habit was built on the problem that you think pouring a glass of wine is solving. Alright, that's it for today everyone. See you next week.

Hey, if you're a woman who enjoys this podcast and wants to have me as your coach, you have to join the *Take A Break* program. It's a 30-day break from drinking that will teach you how to say no to your urges without deprivation, the secret to not needing a drink in any situation, including not needing a drink to take the edge off, and never again feeling like you can't trust yourself around alcohol. Join me over at RachelHart.com/join. Together, we're going to blow your mind.