

Ep #167: Emotional Fluency



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Rachel Hart

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You are listening to the *Take A Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, episode 167.

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.

Well hello everyone. Today I'm talking about something that I call emotional fluency, and I'm going to tell you, this skill is important no matter what is happening in your life, but it is doubly important when you have a lot of negative emotion, which is what many of you are experiencing right now when you think about the coronavirus.

So this skill is going to be really important for you to practice and to master. I'm going to start to show you how to do that today. Now, when I'm working with women in the *Take A Break* program, in their first 30 days, they learn two really important tools.

One is how to allow the urge to drink and not say yes to it and not use willpower and not try to fight it, but just allow it to be there. And the other is really the practicalities of taking what they hear me talk about on the podcast, the think-feel-act cycle, and how to start to really learn how to coach themselves with that model.

These two skills are really the foundation for changing the habit. Now, many women actually extend their stay and continue working with me past their 30 days, and in their first advanced class that they get, what I teach them is the skill about emotional fluency because that's how important it is, not only to changing your relationship with your emotions, but to really change the habit that you have with any kind of numbing activity.

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Because what I don't ever want to see is that someone takes a break from drinking and then they just start eating a bunch. So often that flip-flop happens when you don't have the skill of emotional fluency. Because when you have a lot of negative emotion, you need to figure out how to peacefully coexist with them, and that's where emotional fluency comes in.

Listen, thought work is amazing, but you cannot start using it and expect that if you just get really, really good at managing your mind, you're never going to feel a negative emotion again. That's something that I have to really explain to a lot of people. They kind of think, "Oh okay, if my thoughts create my feelings and my feelings drive my actions, if I can just think all the good, positive supportive thoughts, then I'll never have a negative emotion," and it doesn't work that way."

Thought work is really about learning how to relate to all of your emotions in a new way and more importantly, not letting negative emotions drive actions of numbing. So not using drinking and eating or distracting as a way to feel better because of course, it doesn't work. Then you discover that you have a totally different relationship with your negative emotions and you can come through them, you can move through how you feel so much quicker.

I want to actually give you an example from this morning. I was really annoyed at my husband this morning. Really annoyed. Now, before learning about the think-feel-act cycle, I would have blamed him, I would have doubled down on how he was the problem. I may have tried to convince him to change his behavior, which you know, I find it doesn't really work so well.

My husband doesn't like it when I try to control him. But you know what else I would have done? I would have been really annoyed and I would have said, "Whatever, I can't deal with this, I just need to get working." And so I would have started my day with that annoyance, so it wouldn't have

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gone anywhere. It would have just carried right alongside me throughout my day as I worked.

And probably, when my workday was over, I would have looked up from my desk and I would have seen my husband and I would have still been so annoyed, and I probably would have picked a fight with him. This is what would have happened in the past before I had emotional fluency.

But instead, I felt really annoyed this morning and my inclination was just start working. I don't have time to deal with this. But I said, "You know what Rachel, we're not doing that. We're not going to sit down at the computer and start working until you write out a think-feel-act cycle, until you take the thoughts out of your head and look at them on paper."

So that's exactly what I did. And I'm going to tell you, maybe a minute and a half into it, I started to see what was really going on. I started to see that it wasn't my husband that was annoying me. It was my thinking that was annoying me. And I can't really explain it any other way than in that moment when I had that realization, it was like a cloud lifted.

All the annoyance that I had felt that morning slowly started to evaporate because I suddenly saw, oh, he's not the cause of it. I'm the cause of it with my thinking. And I can change how I want to think. And I felt so much better, and then I started my workday.

And that's what I want you guys to understand. You're still going to feel negative emotions when you learn how to manage your mind because you're still a human being, but you're going to understand how to deal with them differently, and they're not going to boomerang all around your life creating all of these negative consequences. And you'll be able to move through your negative emotions so much more quickly.

And that happens because you have the skill of emotional fluency. And I cannot reiterate how important, how freeing it is to have these skills at a

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time like this when so many people are panicking and freaking out and feeling terribly. It really does change your entire experience.

So let's back up a little bit. Before we can talk about emotional fluency, you guys need to understand what emotions are. I talk about this all the time on the podcast, but just as a refresher, emotions are a state of mind that you can sense in your body. So you might be saying I'm happy, or I'm sad, or I'm lonely, or I'm bored, or I'm afraid.

Right now, you might be noticing more emotion than normal, or you may notice that your emotions have intensified. They've kicked it up a notch. So maybe your anxiety now feels like fear, or maybe your boredom now feels like dread. If it feels like your emotions are in overdrive, it's because your thoughts are in overdrive.

This is not the time to push your emotions away. It's the time to really recognize that your emotions, all of them including the negative ones, they serve a really important purpose for you. You want to have them. For starters, negative emotions create contrast. We need the full spectrum of human emotions, the good and the bad, the light and the dark, so that we can experience more of the emotions that we want to, that we desire.

Because every emotion exists in a contrast to another. If you didn't know anxiety, you couldn't know peace. If you didn't know fear, you wouldn't know security. If you didn't know boredom, you wouldn't know excitement. The list goes on. If you didn't know grief, you wouldn't know love.

You have negative emotions and they allow you to experience the positive ones because the experience that you have exists in the contrast. Part of why positive emotions feel good is because you know what it's like to feel bad. But you also need emotions because they direct you to the content of your mind.

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Your emotions are always a clue to what you are thinking about, what you are making a situation mean. Now, what happens when I start teaching people how to really coach themselves, they want to do it in a really linear way. They want to work through the circumstance and then the thought and the feeling and the action and the result because we write it in a very linear way.

But here's the thing; a lot of people recognize that the first thing they notice is the emotion, and then they have to work backwards to figure out oh, what's the circumstance, what's the thought? That's totally normal. Because emotions are a window into your mind and you want that window because without it, you can't change what's happening in there. You can't change what's happening in your mind.

The window is really necessary. Now, I know a lot of you might be thinking, "Okay fine, negative emotions serve a purpose or a window into my mind, and they help me understand what the positive feels like, but you know what Rachel, right now I'm hanging out with a lot of anxiety and a lot of boredom and a lot of dread and a lot of grief," and I get it. I get the picture.

I know what these emotions feel like. I don't want to keep meeting them over and over again. But that's only because you don't yet have the skill of emotional fluency. Because emotional fluency is the ability to name and notice and peacefully coexist with whatever you are feeling without the need to escape.

And if you want to get through a crisis without numbing, or if you just want to get through the end of your day and not automatically turn to food or alcohol or TV as a way to feel better, you have to develop the skill of emotional fluency.

Because that really is the only way to teach your brain that negative emotions aren't a problem. And when you understand that, then you don't

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need to numb. You don't need to pour a glass of wine to feel better, or open up a bag of chips.

I want you to think about it this way. There's the experience that you have in your body of the negative emotion. Say for example, I'm feeling anxious. You can notice the experience of anxiety in your body, what happens in your body when you feel anxious. And then there's your judgment of anxiety.

And judgment sounds like, "I shouldn't be anxious, I'm too anxious, I don't want to be anxious, it's not fair that I have so much anxiety and other people don't." All of that judgment is created by your mind. So think about it. You've got that original emotion of anxiety but then all of your judgment about how you don't want to be feeling this way or you shouldn't be feeling this way, or you feel too much of this, now all that judgment is layering guilt and shame on top of how you're feeling, on top of that anxiety.

So what have you done? You've added resistance into the mix. First you just had the anxiety, but now you have resistance or guilt or shame on top of it. You unknowingly have made the situation worse, so the experience of your anxiety is now more fraught.

And here's the thing; when you learn how to clean up the resistance to how you're feeling, when you clean up all that judgment, that's when you start to see, not only is the experience of the emotion just easier because you're not fighting it, but you start to see that the emotion itself is just the puzzle piece in the think-feel-act cycle.

Instead of something that you need to bat away or resist or fight or numb or eat or drink over, it's just a clue. And you want more puzzle pieces, you want more clues because the more that you have, the more that you can figure out how your mind and your habits are working. Without the puzzle pieces, without the clues, we just escape into drinking and eating and hiding from how we feel.

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So the way to start creating emotional fluency is to name and notice and observe your judgments so that you can start peacefully coexisting with however you feel. I'm going to walk you through each of these steps.

So let's start first with naming the emotion. It seems so simple, but this is really difficult for a lot of people. I'm going to tell you a little story. Before I was sheltering in place in San Francisco, I was actually with my bestie Kara Loewentheil, who is also a coach. She is an amazing person.

She has an incredible podcast called Unfuck Your Brain, and we were together in Arizona on a long-planned trip together where we were doing something called Equus coaching. Now, Equus coaching is using horses and working with horses to really gain insight on yourself.

I'm going to tell you, when I told my dad about this work he said, "And Rachel, did the horses stop drinking at the end of it?" That's what my dad thought of Equus coaching, but that's not what it's about. Horses are incredibly sensitive.

So you may have heard before that a horse will know if you are afraid when you're riding it. Even if you're not panicking, even if you're not freaking out or yelling or screaming or flapping your arms around, the horse will know because the horse can sense the smallest shifts in your body, in your energy, in your breathing, in your tension, the way you're gripping the rein, the way you're holding your body.

And because of how sensitive horses are, they're kind of an amazing BS detector. It's very hard, if not impossible, to fake how you're feeling around a horse because emotions are expressed through your body. So I've done Equus coaching a couple times and I find it so powerful because it forces me to be in my body, it forces me to be in the present moment.

Instead of engaging with all of my stories and my thoughts and my judgment and my inner dialogue and my inner critic and all of my thoughts

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about the past and the future and my worries, I'm forced to be really present because the horse is living in the present moment and it's mirroring its environment around it, including me.

So basically, when you're doing this work, you really can't hide from your emotions. That's why it's so powerful. And one of the most important things that we learned during our two days of doing this coaching together is that horses want something called congruency. They don't like it when someone is pretending to be confident when inside, they're kind of freaking out.

Because the horse can sense that something doesn't add up. Trying to project confidence when you're really feeling anxious is incongruent. It doesn't add up. So the best thing that you can do when you're in the ring with the horse was simply to name how you were feeling.

And as soon as you name it, you stop resisting it, which creates congruency. So it was better to be in the ring and say, "I'm feeling a lot of anxiety right now," which many times I was as I was doing this coaching and working with these horses because they're huge. They're really big.

But as soon as I acknowledged that emotion, I became congruent with how I was feeling. It was better to do that than to get into the ring and deny how you were feeling and say, "I'm fine, I'm fine, I'm fine," and pretend that you're confident when you're not.

And I'll tell you this; it was so beautiful to really have this experience with the horses because you get to see it and you get to see how your resistance drops just when you name how you're feeling. And I'll tell you this; it sounds easy to just name your emotion, but it is really hard for a lot of us, and it used to be very hard for me.

Sometimes it can still be hard for me because we're socialized not to. We think, "I don't want to name the emotion because I want it to go away. So I

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don't want to give voice to how I'm feeling. I hope that if I stay silent, I'm not going to feel it." That's what I thought for a very long time, but of course, that never worked.

Think about all of the emotions that we are taught not to feel. Men shouldn't cry, women shouldn't be angry, jealousy is sinful, vulnerability is weak. We have all of these judgments about right and wrong emotions, and those judgments get in the way of us even naming how we're feeling.

Think about what's happening right now with you and your own emotions. Are you telling yourself, "I'm not supposed to be anxious. I'm supposed to be strong, I'm supposed to be calm, I'm supposed to be in control?" All of that judgment creates incongruity in your life. Simply by not wanting to name the emotion, not wanting it to be there is causing all this resistance.

And I've been thinking about this a lot with the coronavirus. When my anxiety appears, I don't put my head down and try to work over it, which is what I used to do in the past. I don't push it away. I just name it. Oh, I'm feeling anxious right now, what's going on? All of a sudden, it just drops the resistance.

I was talking about this recently with another coach about how mind-blowing it is to go through a pandemic and not have any desire to drink. I still kind of have to pinch myself a little bit because surely, if you had told me back when I was drinking that at some point in the future there was going to be a pandemic and I was going to have to shelter in place for an indefinite period of time and I was going to have a full-time business and a toddler at home, the past version of me would have been like, "Should we start going to the liquor store now and preparing and stocking up?"

And here I am sitting with no desire to drink. It doesn't even cross my mind. And the amazing thing is I've heard from so many clients in the past week who are also in disbelief that they can feel this way. They can't believe that they're going through a pandemic where there's so much panic and there's

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so much fear and not only are they not freaking out, they're managing their emotions and they're not reaching for a drink.

So that's the thing. That is the power of naming an emotion, and it's the first part of emotional fluency. Naming how you're feeling, it takes power away from the emotion and gives it back to you because you no longer are hiding from how you feel. It's just like, yeah, right now I'm feeling anxious or right now I'm feeling dread. It's okay, I can say it out loud.

Because once you name it, you can notice it. That's the second part of emotional fluency. Noticing and where do we notice our emotions? In our body. Remember, emotions are a state of mind that you can sense in your body, which means that the way that you start to learn how to manage how you're feeling right now with everything in the world is to tune into your body. You've got to pay attention.

You have to move towards your body, not away from it. This is not what most people are used to doing, especially when you're in the habit of numbing. Especially when you turn to food or drink to feel better. We're used to totally disconnecting from our bodies because we don't want to feel it. We don't even want to name the emotion.

So we drink when we feel stressed, or we eat so we won't feel bored. And right now, a lot of people out there are like, listen, all bets are off. I'm going to eat and drink as much as I want because that's how we've been taught to cope with how we feel. To cover up our body, to numb how our body is feeling, to numb the seat of our emotional experience.

But really, when you notice what's actually happening in your body, you start to question what is so bad about a negative emotion. Now, when I first start working with people and I ask them this question, they will almost always say the same thing. "It feels terrible, it feels awful in my body." But those are judgments about what's happening in your body.

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I want you to get really factual. Can you describe how this state of mind is unfolding throughout your body without all the judgment? It sounds like, “My chest is tight. My palms are sweaty. My legs are restless. My jaw is clenched. My breathing is shallow.” The list can go on.

Being really factual with what you are noticing in your body does not sound like, “I feel awful and I want to die.” Those are judgments. The reason why you have to get really factual about what’s happening in your body is because then you get authority over what is happening.

When you tell yourself that something is terrible and awful and you want to die, then of course you don’t want to feel it. You want to just run away from it. But you’re just adding more resistance into the mix. So you’re anxious and then you’re resistant to feeling that anxiety because you’re telling yourself you shouldn’t, and then you’re resistant to actually observing it in your body because you’re telling yourself it’s awful and terrible and you want to die.

Noticing what’s happening in your body, I cannot stress this enough, it is a skill. You will be unsure of how to do this at first. You will want to revert to, “I don’t know, I feel terrible. I don’t know, I feel tense everywhere.” I watch this happen with people because this is also what happened with me.

And when someone’s truly new to this work, I’ll usually say to them when they say, “I don’t know, I just feel tense everywhere,” I’ll say, “Okay, do you feel tense in your earlobe?” People will kind of look at me usually and kind of roll their eyes a little bit and say, “Okay fine, no, not there.”

But then it’s like okay, so where then? Let’s get specific. Let’s get factual. The more factual you can get, the less judgment you have. Noticing what’s happening in your body is a skill, especially when you’re used to trying to numb your body so you don’t have to feel your emotions.

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But this is where you get all your power because then you can be like, okay, my chest feels tight, or okay, my palms are sweaty or my jaw is clenched. That's okay. I'm alright. I'm still safe. I'm not dying. You start to really see that the sensations connected to an emotion are truly harmless. They aren't a problem. They're totally manageable.

You might not like them, but it's not the emergency that your lower brain wants you to believe. Because as long as you believe it's an emergency, what will you do? If it's an emergency, well then, I have justification to have the drink or go into the kitchen or have seconds. I have justification because it's an emergency.

So that's what your lower brain wants you to believe. But when you feel fear or dread and tell yourself, "I'm going to die," and you believe the lower brain's interpretation that it's an emergency, that's when you get into trouble. It's not when you experience the negative emotion. It's when you believe that interpretation.

Now thankfully, you have a prefrontal cortex. Thankfully, you have a higher brain that can know better. It can remind you, "You know what, you're safe, you have shelter, you have clean water, you have food, you're okay. This is just tightness, this is just clenching. You're perfectly safe right now."

And once you remind yourself that you're okay and these physical sensations are normal, then you can start working on the cause of your emotion, which is always what's happening in your mind. It's always a thought. And until you start doing this, until you start examining your think-feel-act cycle, until you start really bringing emotional fluency into your life, the alternative is just trying to control your world.

So we end up rushing around and buying supplies and saying, "I just want to know when this will be over," sanitizing everything and everyone, hoping that that will keep you safe. Now, please hear me. I have supplies. I wash and sanitize my hands and my house and my child.

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These things are important. Sheltering in place, social distancing, hand washing, it is going to help slow the spread of the virus. But these actions can't change your feelings. They will not do anything to make you feel better in the long run. The only thing that will actually work is to start shifting your thinking.

None of these actions actually change your thoughts. So there's taking precautions to stop the spread of the virus and then there's managing your mind. Please do not confuse these two things. They are not the same. Each part needs your attention.

But taking precautions, all of the precautions in the world will not change your think-feel-act cycle. So the next time you are experiencing a negative emotion, I want you to simply name it out loud and notice it in your body. It's even more powerful if you can name it out loud to another person.

I promise you, this is harder than it sounds. You might think it won't make a difference. But as soon as you do that, you start releasing some of the resistance. As soon as you start noticing factually what's happening in your body, you start releasing a little bit more of the resistance, and then you start getting the puzzle pieces you need to start figuring out how to start responding and relating to your emotions differently.

You can start accessing all the thoughts in your mind that are creating it. And you'll start to get the path to create change. That is how you learn how to peacefully coexist with how you're feeling, and that's what truly makes a difference. Emotional fluency is the skill no one ever taught us, but that every single person needs.

Alright my friends, that's it for today. I will be back tomorrow with another special episode.

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

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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.