

Ep #169: Why Positive Thinking Backfires



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Rachel Hart

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

Ep #169: Why Positive Thinking Backfires

You are listening to the *Take A Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, episode 169.

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.

Hello everybody. We are talking about positive thinking today and the downsides of it because you have probably heard me talk about this on the podcast before. I really do believe there are some real downsides with this idea of, oh, just think positively.

And I decided that I wanted to talk to you guys about it today because I was reading a story in the New York Times about how to live with fear. How to live with fear and anxiety and worry in the time of COVID-19. And this article was interviewing a woman named Kate Bowler, I don't know, I've never seen her name before. I hadn't heard of her, but she was amazing.

She's a cancer survivor and she's a religious scholar and she was asked this question by the interviewer about the idea of just staying positive. And she said something that I thought was so perfect and I really wanted to share it with you and then talk about it in depth.

Because she said that the main problem, her idea that the main problem with staying positive was that it adds shame to suffering, by just requiring everyone to be prescriptively joyful. I thought that was so perfect. Adding shame to suffering. We don't realize that this happens. We sometimes think that we're just in our suffering and then there's more suffering, but we don't realize that we've actually added to our suffering by telling ourselves that we shouldn't feel this way.

Ep #169: Why Positive Thinking Backfires

That really is something that if you can learn how not to add shame to your suffering, you will be amazed at how much easier it will be to actually move through whatever negative emotion you're experiencing. It's such a critical skill for everyone to really master. Not just in the time of a pandemic but always, to always have this skill.

And I really believe that the ideas and misconceptions that we have about positive thinking and staying positive and searching for the silver lining actually really block our ability to not add shame to suffering, and that's what I want to help you understand today. Because learning how to manage your mind with the think-feel-act cycle, which is what this podcast is all about, how to take charge of your brain and not feel at the mercy of it, that is not the same thing as thinking lovely thoughts all the time.

In fact, it's really the opposite of that. It's really the opposite of being prescriptive with your thoughts and instead, making space for all of them. Because only thinking lovely thoughts, it doesn't work in regular times and it certainly isn't going to work in the middle of a pandemic. And I always know when my clients are confused about this concept because I was confused at first too.

I also didn't understand it when I started embarking on this work of learning how to manage my mind and learning how to shift my thinking. But I'll always know when my clients are confused because I'll hear it in what they say to me. So they say things like, "I know I shouldn't think this, I know I shouldn't say this to myself, I know I should be positive, I know I should look on the bright side."

I'll hear it in the language, all those shoulds. Because their believing that there's a right way to think. There is no right way to think. That's not what you're learning here. When you start to examine how your thoughts create your feelings and your feelings drive your actions, it's not about doing so to learn that there's a right way to think and that you have to scrub your brain clean of all these negative thoughts. No.

Ep #169: Why Positive Thinking Backfires

It's about just understanding how your thoughts and your feelings and your actions come together to produce the results in your life, to examine that and start to see that you have power to change it. You do not have power, however, to never have a negative thought and never have a negative emotion again because that is impossible.

And if you believe, if you're telling yourself, "I just need to be positive, I just need to see the silver lining, I should never say that to myself," if you go down that trap of believing that positive thinking is the solution, you're going to find that it's going to backfire. And that's what I want to talk to you about today. I want you to really understand what positive thinking is and why it can backfire and what you need to be practicing instead.

So let's start with just what positive thinking is. I was looking for a definition online and I found a lot of different ones, but the one that I thought really summed it up was the idea that positive thinking is focusing on the thoughts that expect the good and anticipating happiness, health, and success, rather of course, than focusing on the thoughts that expect the bad and anticipating unhappiness or sickness or failure.

Now listen, doesn't that sound really lovely? Focus on the good, anticipate happiness, health, and success. Of course it does. It sounds really great. But when you start resisting and telling yourself that you shouldn't have thoughts about the negative, you shouldn't be anticipating unhappiness and sickness and failure, when you start wrestling with that, you are literally wrestling with the way that your brain evolved.

And I don't want you wrestling with it because that's when you feel out of control with your brain. I want you to learn how to be in charge of it, and being in charge of it doesn't mean that you are able to go back and undo hundreds of thousands of years of evolution.

Because I talk about this all the time, I talk about how the lower brain, the most primitive part of your brain, it evolved to spot danger in the

Ep #169: Why Positive Thinking Backfires

environment. It evolved to spot the negative. It was designed that way to help you survive, so it's always trying to keep you safe by looking out for danger, and that's a beautiful thing. We don't have to hate on that.

You just have to understand which part of your brain is currently telling you that everything is doom and gloom, and remember that you don't just have a primitive lower brain. You also have a higher brain. You also have that prefrontal cortex, and you can also start utilizing some of that.

But again, it's not making your lower brain go away. It's not scrubbing that part of your brain clean, not that you could. It's about learning how to coexist with it. That's really the shift. Because here's the thing; you can see how letting your lower brain run the show is a problem, not only when it comes to habits like drinking, it's a problem just in general because the lower brain is focused only on avoid pain, find pleasure, and do both really easily and efficiently.

And listen, if you don't have a healthy relationship with your emotions because PS, no one ever showed you how to, if you find that you never saw a good model in your life for dealing with all of your emotions without escaping, if you are in this situation and you're letting your lower brain run the show, what are you going to do? You're going to find yourself reaching for a drink and reaching for food and trying to distract yourself from how you feel.

You're just going to be looking for that kind of immediate, fast, momentary pleasure. But here's the problem; when the negative emotions don't go away because guess what, we're human. We have them. It's a normal part of being human. You're never going to get to a point where you have zero negative emotions. When they don't go away and you don't feel capable of dealing with them on your own, what do you do? You reach for a drink or you reach for more food.

Ep #169: Why Positive Thinking Backfires

So that lower brain just has you going back for that quick false pleasure over and over and over again and creating more negative emotion for yourself because then you don't like how you feel the next day, you don't like what you did, you don't like what you said. You don't like the results that you're getting.

So you can see what the downside is about letting your lower brain run the show and focusing on the negative, and it seems like when you understand this piece of the puzzle, it seems like, oh, okay, so I don't want my lower brain to run the show so let's just focus on the positive. Isn't positive thinking the antidote?

But it isn't because what happens then, when you believe that positive thinking, I should only think about the good and I should only thinking about everything that's working, and I should only imagine a beautiful, bright, wonderful future, when you think that that is the solution, you're going to find yourself immediately kind of at war with yourself.

Because you still have a lower brain, guys. No matter how much positive thinking you practice, you still have a part of your brain that evolved to spot the negative and to find danger. We're not trying to scrub it out of existence. We're trying to learn how to coexist with it.

And it might be confusing for you to hear me say that positive thinking is not the answer because I know that you guys listen to me talk all the time about how much power you have to change your thinking and to choose thoughts on purpose and to understand that a thought is just a sentence in your mind and it's optional always.

So I talk about let's redefine what failure means. I was coaching a woman last week in the Take A Break program on this. I was coaching her on failure and it blew her mind to understand that failure, like alcohol, is neutral. It literally means nothing. It has no meaning until we attach meaning to it.

Ep #169: Why Positive Thinking Backfires

And so I talk about you can redefine failure and you can examine what you drank last night from a place of curiosity. You don't have to just immediately go into the trap of beating yourself up. So I talk about changing your automatic default thinking all the time, but there is a catch. I'm not talking about being positive about everything.

In fact, often what I'm talking about is just going to a place of neutrality. People don't understand that that's an option. They don't understand how powerful it can be to just take all the judgment out of a thought. Everything that's telling you that it's terrible and it's bad and it's horrible, to just look at the pure facts, to just try to go to neutral. People don't realize that that's such a power place. That's what I was saying to this woman who I was coaching.

When we were talking about failure and what it meant, and to just understand, oh my gosh, failure is neutral. We don't have to attach any label to it. It doesn't have to be positive and it doesn't have to be negative. We can just look at it without any judgment. That is an incredible thing to do. It's also incredible to move to a place of curiosity, to wonder about what's happening.

Not to say, "Oh, everything is hunky dory and I love it," but to just be curious about what's going on. Moving to neutral and getting curious, that's not positive thinking. That's not labeling something as good. It's not looking for the silver lining, but it is redirecting your brain to start to see, can I look at this situation from a different perspective?

Now, I want you to really hear me when I say this. I'm not saying, "Oh, you drank a bottle of wine last night? It's fine. No big deal. You're still wonderful." That's not what I'm suggesting. What I'm suggesting is hey, let's just look at that bottle of wine that you consumed and see what you're making it mean, see what you have decided that it means about who you are as a person and what it means about your ability to succeed and what it

Ep #169: Why Positive Thinking Backfires

means about your future. And can you examine that from a place of curiosity? Can you get really neutral about it?

It's not about being a Polly Anna. It's about watching your thoughts unfold in the think-feel-act cycle and then deciding once you see what they're creating for you, once you understand how telling yourself, "God, I'm such a screw up," how that creates shame and when you feel shame, you just dig in deeper.

It's about deciding, hey, can I find another thought that serves me? And maybe that thought is just one that creates curiosity, or maybe it's just one that just takes away all the judgment. It's just I drank a bottle of wine last night. End of sentence. That's not positive thinking. But I promise you, just taking away a lot of that judgment would help you move forward.

I don't think that positive thinking serves people because as a society, we're so mistaken about what it means to be positive. Most people think that when they're unhappy, it's a problem. Most people tell themselves, "I'm not supposed to feel this way. I'm supposed to be happier than this. I'm supposed to feel good most of the time."

I always, always ask people and prod people, well, what is the ratio of happiness to unhappiness? And you know, most people will sheepishly admit to me, "I really think that I'm supposed to be happy most of the time. I think that my life is supposed to be going well and I'm feeling good and I've got the positive emotions the majority of the time. And maybe I'll take the 5% or the 10% crappy but I don't want more than that."

Now, the problem is it doesn't work like this. That's not what it's like to be a human on this planet. We are not supposed to feel good the majority of the time. Isn't that crazy? That's literally the opposite of what everyone leads us to believe. What every advertiser out there wants us to think. Feel bad, buy a dress. Feel crappy, have a drink. Feel like you're not measuring up, buy this car.

Ep #169: Why Positive Thinking Backfires

We're so often sold this message that all you need to do is purchase and consume something and spend money and then you're going to be happier and that you should be happier more of the time. But that's not the way it's supposed to work. We have the full spectrum of negative emotion and they balance each other out.

When you feel a negative emotion, it doesn't mean that anything has gone wrong or that there's something wrong with you or something wrong with your brain, or that you're doing thought work wrong. It just means that you're human. It's not this ratio of 95% good, 5% bad. It's about starting to understand a 50:50 split. Making space for your life to have both in equal proportions.

I was talking about this recently. I was actually on someone else's podcast being interviewed, and I was talking about discomfort. And I was saying, you know what, it's coming either way. Discomfort is part of the human condition. And so it's not about how do I erase discomfort from my life, because when I have tried to do that, when I have tried to remove all the discomfort, what I have done in my life is gone deeper into drinking and deeper into overeating, and deeper into all of the habits in which I numb.

The point is not to erase discomfort. It's choosing the kind of discomfort that you want. When you understand that's part of the human condition, then you get into such a place of power because then you can say, okay, so do I want the discomfort that comes with growing and evolving and learning how to be a new version of myself?

Because listen, that is going to be uncomfortable. Growing and evolving and learning a new skill, it's all going to feel uncomfortable. So that's one option. Or do you want the discomfort that comes from stagnating and regressing and waking up and thinking, "God, why did I do that again? Why do I keep consuming things this way? Why do I keep drinking so much or eating so much? Why did I waste last night zoned out?"

Ep #169: Why Positive Thinking Backfires

Discomfort is coming either way. There is discomfort in staying stuck in the habit of drinking or overeating or whatever your habit is right now that you want to change, there's discomfort in staying stuck, and there's discomfort in the learning of how to change it. Because you are going to have to challenge your brain to start to show up differently. And that will be uncomfortable at first.

That is the only way to make space for both the positive and the negative is to really start to embrace this idea of 50:50. The equal split. There is both positive and negative, good and bad. In fact, I don't really even like saying good and bad when I label my emotions because it sounds so much like it's a moral judgment.

But just understanding that there is the light and the dark, there are all these opposites. So to accept that there is going to be loneliness and regret and boredom and grief and anger in your life and that's okay, it's not a problem. It's a normal part of the human experience. It's a part of what it means to be alive.

Just accepting that will allow you to show up so much differently with your negative emotion because you won't automatically be interpreting it as something has gone wrong and I need to fix it. Because there will be a part of your brain, your lower brain, that's saying it's terrible, it's an emergency, this is pain, this is horrible, let's fix it, what do we have in the kitchen, what can I eat, what can I drink. We don't need to listen to that part of the brain that doesn't know any better, doesn't understand that emotions are just harmless vibrations in the body.

You can listen to your higher brain, the part of your brain that can do higher reasoning and logic and weigh the pros and cons, and can understand, listen, sometimes in life, you're hot and sometimes you're cold. Sometimes you're tired and sometimes you have energy. Life is made up of the contrast of opposites. And you know what? It's totally normal. And the same is true with your emotions.

Ep #169: Why Positive Thinking Backfires

Sometimes you're lonely, sometimes you feel connected. Sometimes you're calm, sometimes you're angry. Sometimes you're bored and sometimes you're enthralled. That contrast of opposites is totally normal. It's beautiful. It's one of the things that makes our human experience technicolor. It's why we live in a world that just isn't greyscale and this kind of flat same experience over and over again because we have the contrast.

The only problem is when you label a negative emotion as something has gone wrong. Because then you become desperate to immediately change how you're feeling, and that's when things really don't work. Because when you are desperate to change how you feel, you're going to run straight into the kitchen.

That's what I always did. I would be stressed out and I would just come home and go immediately to the kitchen and pour a glass of wine. Or I would be bored and I would go immediately to the kitchen and I'd grab a bag of chips. Or I'd be pissed off at work and I would immediately grab my purse, go outside and light up a cigarette.

That's what I was always rushing to do because I thought that something was wrong with my negative emotions. I wasn't learning how to be with them. I was learning how to cover them up. I was learning how to go after a quick fix. And you know what? A quick fix, it worked for a while. Of course, all of the drinking and all of the eating and all of the smoking, it started to add up with more negative results.

So then I was having consequences that I didn't like on top of not liking how I was feeling. So it felt like a lose-lose situation. And this is the thing; when you understand the think-feel-act cycle, and then you will start to see that you don't have to swoop in and start practicing only positive thinking all the time. Because that won't work.

Instead of reaching for wine or chips or a cigarette to feel better, you also don't want to start telling yourself, "I just need to find the perfect thought to

Ep #169: Why Positive Thinking Backfires

make this emotion go away.” People will say this to me all the time when they start doing this work with me in the Take A Break program. They’ll say, “I haven’t found the thought yet. I still feel this emotion. Tell me what the thought is, Rachel.”

And what I always say to them is, “Why are you in such a rush? What’s the problem with this emotion? Why are you telling yourself that you can’t handle it or that you need to immediately find the thought to make it go away? That’s the real problem.” You can use thought work against yourself if you think this is an exercise in just positive thinking.

You will always be stuck then because you will always be looking for how can I just be thinking differently, how can I just find the silver lining so I don’t have to feel this emotion. But we can’t escape negative emotions. They’re part of being alive, but we can learn how to deal with them and respond to them and relate to them in ways that not only don’t cause net negative effects for us, but allow us to move through the negative emotion so much more quickly.

Because the emotional state that’s happening, the changes in your body when you feel an emotion, they really aren’t a problem. It’s little changes in how you hold yourself, how you hold your body, the tension you feel, your breathing might change, your heart rate might change, your temperature, your blood flow will change, different parts of your body. You’re totally fine.

That’s what we’re teaching our lower brain. We’re totally fine. Positive thinking backfires because it doesn’t make room for the full complicated human experience, the contrast of opposites. It doesn’t make room for experiencing all the emotions and learning how to process them and move through them differently.

It just tells you, well, you must not be positive thinking hard enough. You must not be doing it right. And the less you’re able to tolerate how you feel, the more you will turn to a quick fix to feel good, the deeper you will go into

Ep #169: Why Positive Thinking Backfires

habits of numbing. Because you can't erase negative emotions from your experience. That is why the skill is so needed, whether or not you're learning to change the habit of drinking or you're trying to manage your mind in the middle of a pandemic.

Learning the skill of just how to be emotionally honest with what is happening, saying it out loud, making space for it, not judging the emotion that's coming up, that is the skill that's so important and so powerful. We don't want to be honest with other people with how we feel, and we certainly don't know often how to be honest with ourselves. I know that I didn't.

I didn't want people to know how I was feeling because I hated how I was feeling a lot of the time. I have one memory of this that stands out so much for me because I think it really captures how I dealt with my negative emotions from a really young age.

So about a decade ago now, my sister started dating a woman who is now her wife. And all of us were home in Connecticut for Thanksgiving. So we were home at a time when my aunt Sue was really sick. She was dying from cancer. And I've talked about my aunt Sue on the podcast before. She really was like a fairy godmother to me.

She lived 10 minutes away from where I grew up. My aunt Sue never had any kids of her own and she really took me and my sister under her wing. She was always taking us to museums and performances and introducing us to art and culture. And losing her to cancer was a really terrible experience that I did not know how to manage.

And we were home in Connecticut for Thanksgiving and she was in hospice. She was spending her last days dying at home. And I remember sitting in my parents' living room and they were telling us that she didn't have long to live, and that we were all going to go down to see her and spend some time with her.

Ep #169: Why Positive Thinking Backfires

And I remember having so much grief come up inside of me and I just ran out of the room. I didn't say anything to my sister or her girlfriend at the time, I didn't say anything to my parents. I just booked it out of the room. And that was really normal for me for a very long time.

When I had a really intense negative emotion, especially one in that moment where I didn't have cigarettes nearby, I didn't have a wine bottle that I could immediately open up, the only thing that I knew to do was run. And it's funny because a couple months later, my sister was telling me that her girlfriend at the time was really confused.

Because she saw my family having this very intense conversation about our aunt Sue and I obviously had an emotional reaction and just ran away. And no one followed me. People just kind of let me be and my sister's girlfriend was really like, what is going on? Why did your sister just run from the room and nobody followed her? She was really confused about this.

And I remember my sister saying, "Oh, I just told Molly, that's what Rachel does. We all know that in the family. There's a really big emotion, Rachel has a lot of feelings, she can't handle it, she just runs away." And that was really my pattern. That's what I did for a really long time because I didn't know how to be with my negative emotions. I just knew how to numb them.

And if I wasn't in a space where I could numb them, all I knew how to do was run away. What was going on for me was that I was experiencing so much grief and I didn't know how to make space for it in my body. At that point in my life, I only knew how to drink over grief or eat over grief or smoke over grief, or if none of those options were available, run and hide.

And that's what I did in that moment. I didn't know what to do and so I just left the room. I tried to escape how I was feeling. And I will tell you that some of the most challenging and rewarding work in my life has been learning how not to run and learning how not to hide, and learning how to sit with myself and my family and my husband and say, "I'm scared, or I'm

Ep #169: Why Positive Thinking Backfires

grieving, or I'm angry. And it's really hard for me to say that out loud but I'm practicing saying it to you because I'm practicing being honest with myself about what's going on."

And it has been so challenging, but I will tell you this; doing that, that work of being honest with myself, being honest with other people, allowing the emotion to be there and not covering it up and not running, it has completely transformed my life. Completely. And positive thinking can't help you here.

Positive thinking is only, like I quoted at the beginning of this podcast, it's only going to add shame on top of your suffering. It's only going to add these thoughts that you shouldn't feel this way or that you should be stronger or thinking differently or managing your mind better. But that's not what you need in those moments.

What you need is the work that I have practiced with myself for over a decade now and the work that I teach women all the time is how to show up differently with these emotions. Because I will tell you this; I've been experiencing a lot of negative emotion over the last couple weeks. A lot to do with the pandemic and feeling very far away from my family and far away from my grandmother and my parents.

And I will tell you that having this skill of not running away and being honest with how I feel and saying to my husband, "I'm really sad. I'm really afraid," it has allowed me to pass through these emotions so much more quickly. Because what I used to do was feel the grief and stuff it down and tell myself I shouldn't be feeling it or it was too much or it was too strong or I couldn't handle it, and telling the people in my life that I was fine and nothing was wrong, and then going to the kitchen and looking for something to drink and looking for something to eat and then feeling regretful that I had done that and beating myself up, that was my pattern for so long.

Ep #169: Why Positive Thinking Backfires

And now that discomfort of being with it and naming it and telling my husband or telling my parents or telling my sister how I'm feeling allows the emotion to pass through me so much more quickly. And that really is the trick. It's not about thinking positively. It's about creating space for your emotions so that you don't start reaching for these coping mechanisms that really aren't coping mechanisms at all.

They're really mechanisms of greater suffering. And I don't care if you're doing that with a drink or a bag of chips or you're doing that with telling yourself that you should only be thinking positive thoughts. These aren't coping mechanisms. This is just resistance.

When you feel that negative emotion, practicing allowing it to be there, being honest with yourself, being honest with others, not judging it, observing it, not numbing it with wine or food or something else, noticing how much your brain wants to judge it as an emergency or a problem, when you can drop that, when you can just start to be neutral about it, you will see that the emotion will pass through you so much more cleanly, so much more quickly. Because you're not fighting it.

And on the other side of that emotion, you will discover, yes, maybe there is a different perspective to be had. Maybe there is a piece of insight that you would have missed. Maybe there is something that you can learn from this situation. But it's not about always finding silver linings. It's not about always anticipating the good. It's just about making space for the world as it is.

That is the power of learning how to manage your mind. Alright everybody, that's it for today. I will 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

Ep #169: Why Positive Thinking Backfires

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.