

Ep #173: Thought Curiosity



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With Your Host

Rachel Hart

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You are listening to the *Take A Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, episode 173.

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, hello. How are all of you doing today? I was coaching recently and as soon as I was done, I thought, "I have to share this with my podcast listeners." Because it was such an important moment and it's so transformative if you want to change your relationship with alcohol.

So I had a woman in the Take A Break program who I was coaching and she was there and she said, "You know, this is the longest I've ever gone not drinking probably in the last 10 years. And I didn't think that I was going to be able to do it, but I have so much hope right now because I can see, oh, it's just a habit, I wasn't born this way. I taught my brain to drink."

And she was so proud of herself, but also - and this is what's really important - she was also sitting with so much disbelief that she had been able to do this. And this is the key for all of you today because we're going to talk about how your brain is really, really wrong sometimes.

And taking a break, yes, it has so many added benefits. You're giving your mind and your body a rest, time to heal from drinking, you stop waking up feeling like crap, you stop consuming all these empty calories or doing the kind of late-night buzz snacking or ordering in. You start sleeping better, you have more energy, your moods are stabilizing, you might feel less anxious.

But the real power, and I cannot stress this enough, the real power is having that moment of disbelief. Having that moment of being like, "I can't

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believe how wrong my brain was.” Every time my brain told me I couldn’t do it, it was going to be too hard, it wouldn’t work, it was the wrong time, I had failed so many times before, this would be just like all my other attempts, I’ll hate it, I’ll be miserable, to listen to all of that and to challenge yourself to take a break anyway, and then see that all those excuses were wrong.

Your brain was wrong. That is the power. That moment when you’re sitting there in disbelief. Because in that moment, that’s when you have huge opportunity. And I said to her, I said to this woman, “Listen, look how wrong your brain was about alcohol. Look how wrong your brain was about your ability to do this 30-day challenge, and now here you are.”

So just think about it. If your brain was wrong about your ability to take a break, what else might it be wrong about? Maybe it’s wrong about your potential. Maybe it’s wrong about your worthiness. Maybe it’s wrong about your successes and your failures and your abilities and your future. What if your brain is wrong about all of this too? Not just about your ability to take a break and change the habit of drinking, but about all of that?

That is the moment when you really start to see the type of change that is possible for you. Because believing the lies that your brain is telling you right now, and trust me, my brain did the exact same thing for over a decade, believing those lies is what’s fueling the habit. It’s not the alcohol. It’s not the glass of wine. It’s what your brain is telling you is possible for you.

And so I want you guys all to have this moment of disbelief. It’s so powerful. I mean, I now can look back on so many moments in my life, not just with alcohol but with food and relationships and love and my business, so many moments where I sat there in disbelief and realized, “Oh my god, my brain has been totally wrong.” I want this for you too.

And so today, what we’re going to talk about is something called thought curiosity. This is a skill that no one shows us how to develop and practice

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and refine, and it is essential if you want to change your relationship with alcohol.

So we're going to talk about what it means to be curious about your thoughts and why most of us aren't. Why most humans aren't curious about what's happening in their mind. And then I'm going to talk to you about what happens when you start to be curious, when you start to question what your brain is telling you, and why that's so important for taking a break.

Understanding all of this, it is what is needed to get to a place where you never have to worry about your drinking again. When the glass of wine in front of you is not calling your name anymore, it's simply unremarkable, it's simply not a big deal. It requires thought curiosity.

It is not about willpower. It is not about gritting your teeth. It is about learning to view what's happening in your mind in a different way, and it's possible for all of you. So let's start with what it means to be curious about your thoughts.

So I looked up the word curious because why not, and I found that the definition was marked by the desire to investigate. So it's that willingness to examine your thinking, to look at your thoughts from every angle, to investigate everything that your mind is telling you.

Now, I'm going to tell you, most people are not in the habit of doing this. We're not in the habit of investigating our thoughts. We're in the habit of believing them and then repeating them and then believing them some more. So this really is a change.

Now, if you've listened to the podcast, you know that I spent a large part of my career working in human rights before I became a coach. And one of the issues that I worked on quite a bit was the issue of government

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corruption. And there was a quote that we would reference a lot, and that quote is that sunlight is the best disinfectant.

So what it means in the context of human rights is that when a government is transparent and open, and what I mean by that is that their citizens can see and understand how the government is working, then there's less chance for corruption because we can see what's going on. Sunlight is shining down on all the ins and outs of how the government works.

Now, the thing that I love about this is how it applies so beautifully to the context of habit change. Sunlight truly is the best disinfectant for your mind and for your habits. Think about it. I love thinking about this idea. Your brain is sitting there, it's in your skull. It's in complete darkness. And it's churning out all these thoughts.

Now, because of the way the brain evolved, the thoughts that the brain is churning out, they don't sound great. They sound a lot like, "This is bad, this is dangerous, this is scary, I think we're going to die." And so an unmanaged mind is basically saying danger, danger, danger at every opportunity.

Now, this makes sense, and I talk about this on the podcast a lot. We don't need to blame our brain for doing this. We just need to understand why it evolved this way so that we can decide, hey you know what, I'm going to head in a different direction.

Because listen, avoiding danger is what helped humans stay alive. If we didn't have a brain that was really, really good at spotting danger, we wouldn't have survived as a species. When we first arrived on the scene some, I don't know, 200,000 years ago, homo sapiens would not have done well with a brain that was like, "Oh, I don't know, la-di-da, everything is great. Everything is wonderful. Everything is fine."

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We would have died off really quickly because we were living in a dangerous world. And so it was really essential that we had a brain that could spot danger and spot a lot of it, because that's what helped to keep us alive.

But here's the thing; it's not 200,000 years ago. Here we are today, sitting in our modern world. And I like to think of my brain inside my skull, where it's all dark, as if it's still locked in that cave. It is still sitting in the dark being like, "Oh my god, what's that? Did you hear that? Am I going to die? What's around the corner?"

So once I understand that my brain is doing this, the solution is simply sunlight. The solution is simply to let light shine on this brain that is sitting there in darkness, trembling in the cave because it is afraid of a shadow. Now, the beauty is that you have the ability to do this. You have the ability to shine a light on what is happening in your mind because you have consciousness.

You have a part of yourself that can watch your brain think. It can think about its thoughts. You have a part of yourself that is separate from the brain. It can look at a thought, it can be curious about it, it can investigate it, it can decide if you want to keep it. It can decide if it wants to think something new on purpose. That is the beauty of having a human brain.

We have this ability that as far as we know, nothing else can do. We can watch ourselves think. That truly is the power, which means you can watch the habit of drinking unfold. You don't have to listen to your brain that just says, "I need it, I deserve it, taking a break will be terrible, going to this party, ending my day, not having a drink in my hand will be miserable." You don't have to listen to that part of you.

Learning how to watch your mind at work, learning how to observe and question your thoughts, it's the work of being the observer of yourself. We're not usually the observer of ourselves. I certainly wasn't. I just

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listened to myself all the time. I listened to all the thoughts that that really primitive brain came up with, that was sitting in the cave freaked out.

This is what I teach when I teach people how to change the habit of drinking. It's not about focusing on alcohol. That's where you have put all your focus before. It's about focusing in a place where no one has ever shown you. How the mind works, how habits work, how thoughts influence your feelings, which drive your actions.

These are skills that no one has ever taught you. But here's the thing; every single person is capable of learning how to do this. Now, I'll tell you this. When most people start shining a light on the inner workings of their brain, they want to run for cover. I know I certainly did. I did not want to look inside of my brain because what I found in there was pretty lousy.

I found a lot of thoughts like, "You can't do it. You're never going to figure this out. Something is wrong with you. You don't measure up. Every else is smarter or prettier or more accomplished or more successful or further ahead in life." So when I shone a light on what was happening in this cave of mine, it wasn't a pretty picture.

But please don't let that scare you off. Because once you understand that just because you think this way does not mean your thoughts are true, that's when you start to see that watching your brain churn out all these thoughts about how you're doing it wrong and you can't figure it out and it's not going to work, that's when you start to see, "Oh, this is just my primitive brain doing what my primitive brain does. It's just spotting danger."

And it thinks that it is dangerous for me to change the habit, even though I can see that it's not. Even though I have this ability to understand that an urge is not an emergency, feeling a negative emotion is not something that has to be solved immediately with a drink, I can learn to respond differently.

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So these thoughts, they don't have to be believed. They're optional. Now, a lot of my clients, when I start introducing this concept to them, they'll hear me talk about it on the podcast but when they actually enter the 30-day challenge, that's when we're actually working together and they're really starting to take everything that they hear me talk about and they're applying it.

And trust me, going from listening to me talk on the podcast to actually learning how to apply these skills, that's really a whole different ballgame. So they'll start this process, and a lot of people will kind of balk at this idea and they'll balk at the idea that you don't have to believe everything your brain is telling you, and that your thoughts are actually optional.

And they'll resist because they'll say to me, "Well Rachel, my thoughts sure feel true." Now, it's true that thoughts that you practice quite a bit unknowingly, they will produce a lot of certainty. But you have to actually understand what that certainty means.

So let's just take the thought, "I'm never going to figure out my drinking." I had this thought for over a decade. Many of my clients have this thought as well. And it's a terrible thought because when you think it, you probably feel hopeless. I know that I did.

And feeling hopeless is not the emotion that is going to lead to you taking action. When you feel hopeless, you stay stuck. Hopeless people aren't changing their life. Change only comes from having hope, from believing that there is a new path forward for you. And trust me, there is.

So it's a terrible thought to tell yourself over and over again, "I'm never going to figure out my drinking," but of course, that's what I was doing. I didn't understand that it was really unhelpful. I didn't understand anything about the think-feel-act cycle or how I was actually just proving it true over and over again.

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I just knew that even though it felt kind of terrible to think it, it also felt true. And that's where so many of my clients get stuck at first because they'll say, "Well, it just feels true. All these thoughts that I'm thinking about the habit or myself or my future, my abilities, they all just feel true."

And the reasoning why people get stuck here is because they're telling themselves, "Well, if the thought produces a negative emotion and I'm still thinking it, then it must really be true. Why else would I think a thought that didn't feel good on purpose?"

And without understand really how the brain works and how the think-feel-act cycle works, that logic kind of makes sense. But there really is two important reasons that you need to understand why it is your brain will think thoughts that don't feel good. And it has nothing, I mean absolutely nothing to do whether or not the thought is true.

The first reason is because your brain has a lot of evidence to back up the thought. So that's reason number one. And reason number two is your brain loves to be right, even if being right creates a negative emotion. So I'm going to talk about each of these because I really want you guys to understand this so that you can get to a place with this skill of thought curiosity, to end up in that place of disbelief at how wrong your brain can be.

So I've talked about on the podcast before something called confirmation bias. So I want you to think of your thoughts, whatever you're thinking, like the lens through which you see the world. So a while back, there was a lot on social media about people who were colorblind who were given glasses that would help them see the full spectrum of color.

I'm going to tell you this; if you have not seen any of these videos, I find them incredibly moving because suddenly you have these people who may be 10, 20, 30, but some of them were 60 and 70 years old, you have these

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people who for the very first time are seeing green and orange and purple, and it's just so incredible.

Now, the orange and the green and the purple, these colors were always there, but someone who is colorblind, they can't see the color without these glasses because inside their retina, inside their eye, they're missing one of the cone cells that helps them sense light. So either it's not there or it's not working properly.

And I love the idea of being colorblind because I think that thoughts can also act in this way. So a thought can block you from seeing certain things in your environment. So if you have a thought like, "I'm always going to feel like the odd man out if I'm not drinking," which again, was a thought of mine, or if you have a thought like, "Life just isn't going to be as fun if I don't drink," again, that was one of my thoughts too, your brain will start hunting for all this evidence to prove it true. That's confirmation bias at work.

So your brain is scanning for evidence to support what you believe. Now, here's the thing; evidence to the contrary is right there in front of you. I know you will swear that it's not there. I also swore for years that it wasn't there. But it's like the colors that people can't see.

They don't even notice orange and green and purple because they simply can't see it. The color is still there. They just don't yet have the ability to access it. So think of thoughts like, "I'm always going to feel like the odd man out," or, "Life is not going to be as fun if I don't drink," think of those thoughts like blinders.

You will only end up seeing evidence for how these thoughts are true. And then you will say, "See? It feels really true. I have all this evidence to back it up." But that's because you haven't been hunting for the evidence on the other side. You haven't been looking for evidence to disprove your own thinking because we're not taught how to do this. We're not taught how to have thought curiosity.

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And so I find thought curiosity, it's like putting on the glasses that help people who are colorblind see the full spectrum of color. You start seeing things in a new light. You start seeing and finding evidence that was right in front of you but you couldn't see it before because you were so hunkered down in your original thought and so certain that it was true.

So the first reason you think thoughts that don't feel good is because you literally can't see the evidence that's right next to you. Now, I like thinking about how this may have happened for you in the past, and it doesn't have to be about drinking.

A friend, maybe a friend that's trying to console you will be able to point out how you can look at a situation differently or think about yourself in a different way. Our friends usually have the ability to show us that we don't need to be so hard on ourselves.

Now, when this would happen for me, when I used to have this happen in my life where something would happen, maybe I got really drunk the night before and I was really beating myself up and just saying that I was a total screw up and something was wrong with me, I didn't talk about this with my friends a lot. But on the rare occasions that I did, I was most often met with a lot of compassion.

I was not greeted with, "Yeah, you're a total screw up." But I couldn't accept their compassion. In fact, it would kind of annoy me sometimes. I would feel a little angry because I would think, "She doesn't get it. She doesn't understand. She doesn't know what it's like."

Because I was so certain, I had practiced so often, I had found so much evidence for all of my beliefs about drinking and how something was unique to me and this was a unique problem and everyone else was drinking normally and I had something wrong with me, that I couldn't figure it out, I had practiced that for such a long time in my life that I couldn't see any contrary evidence.

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And when it was presented to me, sometimes by a third party, I immediately threw it away. Because again, no one had taught me about thought curiosity. No one had shown me that I could be the watcher of my mind. And no one had shown me that my brain was designed to find the negative in all situations. That's what the brain evolved to do.

Now, the second reason that your brain is thinking a thought that doesn't feel good is because your brain likes to be right. Now, this might be a little weird, but your brain gets a little bit of dopamine when it's right because being correct about things was good for human survival.

Think about how good it feels to get something totally insignificant right, to answer a trivia question correctly. You get that little dopamine hit. You get that little oh, I got it right. Because being correct was really important.

So here's the thing; when your brain thinks that you're right about yourself, even when being right about yourself is proving the thought, "I can't figure it out, I don't measure up, something must be wrong with me," it does feel kind of perversely good.

You have that moment of kind of, a-ha, see, I knew it, I knew something was wrong with me, I knew I'd never be able to do this, I knew I had a real problem. This is such a weird thing but I think it's really important to understand that your brain likes to be right, but it's also really good at spotting danger and it's also really good at finding evidence for what it already believes.

So when you put all of these things together, you start to understand why it is your thoughts feel true. Why it is there's so much certainty around some of your thinking, including thoughts that don't feel very good to think. It's not because they're true. It's because this is how the brain was designed. And without thought curiosity, you will always be stuck in this trap.

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So it'll be incredibly, incredibly difficult for you to change your relationship with alcohol and change the habit that you have developed around drinking. But this is really why most humans aren't curious about what's happening in their mind.

Because when they look, they're really freaked out by the thoughts that they find and then they become afraid that their negative thoughts are true because they simply don't understand that these thoughts are blocking evidence to the contrary. And then they're getting rewarded for being right about themselves, even though what they're being "right" about, which by the way I'm putting quotes, even though what they're being right about is something really negative.

What happens when you start questioning your thinking, when you bring thought curiosity to the table is that it's an incredibly powerful moment for you, but it also sometimes feels a little unsettling. Because it can start to feel like, well, if I can just question everything, if I can question all my thoughts and I can look for evidence to prove anything, it starts to feel like everything is up for grabs.

So on the one hand, it can be very empowering to think maybe I'm wrong about my drinking, maybe I'm wrong about my ability to change, maybe I'm wrong about who I am and what I'm capable of, then what else am I wrong about. But then as you start to dig in, you get to a point where you're like, "I don't know, do I want to be in this place where kind of everything is up for grabs and I'm not really sure anymore what is true."

Because here's the thing; we don't like feeling confused about our mind or our thoughts or the world. And I think it's because we are really taught how to think in a certain way and we're taught how to think so that we produce the correct answers, but we're not actually taught how to think.

That really is a huge distinction. We're taught what to think about. This is how you should think about yourself and how you should think about the

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world and how you should think about the English language. But we're not taught how to think.

And so let me give you an example. Pretty much everyone is taught at some point when they are very young that stealing and lying are just bad. Shouldn't do it. Bad people do it. So we're taught to think this thought, but we're not taught how to come to this conclusion on our own.

Do you see the difference? We're taught to think that lying and stealing are just bad, but not how to come to this conclusion or any conclusion about lying and stealing on our own. So that really has to do with thought curiosity. If no one had ever taught you anything about lying and stealing, how would you reach a conclusion about it? How would you decide what is right?

Would you come to a different conclusion? Would you think something else? I'm going to tell you this; this is the piece of thought curiosity, when you start to open up and you start to enter that realm of disbelief and that realm of like, oh gosh, what else might I be wrong about, how could I see myself and the world differently, this is the part that can kind of put people on edge.

People don't want to inquire, they don't want to do this work a lot of times because they're afraid that they might come to the wrong conclusion, but that's the point of everything that I teach you guys and everything about the think-feel-act cycle is that there is no right or wrong conclusion. There's just the results that you get from drinking or eating or spending or lying or stealing and finding out whether or not you like them. That's it.

That's why this skill is so important for taking a break because you have to have thought curiosity if you want to start to challenge the thoughts that right now are fueling the habit. It really is learning how to think rather than what to think.

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So instead of taking your cues about what to think about drinking from your friends or your family or society or advertisers or what you were raised to believe about alcohol, you decide what you want to think about drinking and the habit and the whole shebang. You get to decide what you want to think about all of that for yourself, which means you don't have to conform to whatever norms happen to be presented to you.

You get to decide what's right for you. No one is in the possession of truth when it comes to alcohol or drinking or whether or not to drink or whether it's right for you or what it means about you if you say no tonight or tomorrow or next month. The only one in the possession of what is actually best for you is you.

This is why thought curiosity is so important. And I know that this is a big topic. I know that what I'm presenting to you guys is, hey, guess what, you can be totally wrong about everything you think and you can question all of your thoughts. It really is a big topic.

It's so much bigger than changing the habit of drinking, although thought curiosity is essential for it. So I know this is a big idea, but I think that you need it. I think that everyone needs it. I think that if you want to stop making the same mistake over and over and stop waking up and feeling like, "Hey, why did I do that again? Why can't I learn my lesson? Why am I not figuring it out?" Then you have to start moving towards this skill and openness to being wrong.

Questioning truly is easy if you have that openness, if you're not determined to be right, even when being right is at the expense of yourself. Thought curiosity is easy if you are willing to go against the grain. Think about it. Think about if no one had ever taught you or told you anything about alcohol. Nothing.

You never heard about it from your parents or from your friends or saw it on movies or read about it in books, nothing, think about if you discovered it

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for the first time. It was totally new to you. It was totally new to the world. No one had heard anything about it, no one had ever told you anything about it. What would you want to think about it on purpose?

After you took the first sip, after you had your first hangover, after the first time you did or said something you wished you hadn't, what would you want to think about it on purpose? If it was up to you to decide. Because that's really the key. It's always up for you to decide. We just don't think that it is.

We're so busy thinking the thoughts that everybody else gave us about how drinking too much means that there's something wrong with us or something wrong with our brain, or that we need it to relax or to have fun or to open up or to connect or to be normal.

If it was up for you to decide, then you wouldn't have to make drinking or not drinking mean anything about who you are. You wouldn't have to label alcohol as good or bad or right or wrong. You wouldn't have to connect it to your ability to have fun or to connect or to relax. You could just simply decide what you wanted to make it mean. That is the power of thought curiosity.

It's a big topic guys, but it truly is something that is so essential for each and every one of you. And here's the thing; when you learn how to be curious about your thinking, when it comes to alcohol and this habit, and you develop that skill, you will be amazed, not just how it will transform your desire to drink but how it will transform everything for you.

That's what has happened in my life. That's what happens for my clients. It's learning the skills, not just to change your drinking, but to transform your life. That's the power of thought curiosity. Alright it was a long one guys, but that's it for today. I'll see you next week.

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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.