

Ep #198: I Can't Handle Not Knowing



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With Your Host

Rachel Hart

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Ep #198: I Can't Handle Not Knowing

You are listening to the *Take A Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, episode 198.

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. We are talking today about how not to handle the stress of not knowing what is going to happen. This is especially relevant today, but of course this comes up in all areas of life. Am I going to get the job? What are my test results going to say? Is my application going to be approved?

And of course, today, this episode is coming out on election day in the United States. And so it's especially fitting because it's pretty likely that we are not going to have the results tonight. We're going to have to wait for them. And unlike recent elections, there's a very good chance that we might have to wait for a while, which means more not knowing, more waiting.

Now listen, we had to wait a month in 2000 to find out who would be president. People in the US have had to wait much longer before. The presidential election of 1876, between Samuel J. Tilden and Rutherford B. Hayes was held on November 7th of that year, and the final result wasn't issued until the following March.

So we've done this before. But that doesn't change that right now, there are a lot of people thinking, "I just don't know if I can handle not knowing. I hate not knowing what's going to happen today. How long am I going to have to wait?" That really is what I want to focus on in today's episode. Why does waiting feel so uncomfortable? Why are we so often trying to escape it?

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I can't tell you how many times I have heard people say in 2020, "I just want to hit fast forward. I just want to fast forward to the end of the pandemic. I just want to fast forward to the end of this election season." And most people will try to find a fast forward button through numbing.

Now, I talk about this all the time on the podcast but if you haven't heard me talk about it before, numbing is the umbrella term that I use to talk about all the ways that people distract themselves from how they feel. You can numb with alcohol, of course, but you can numb with food and money and work and sleep and exercise and organizing.

You can numb yourself with pretty much anything and everything, including by the way, self-improvement. And now this is where people get really confused. They get confused when it comes to discussing this topic of numbing because they focus on the activity and whether or not the activity itself is good or bad, instead of asking themselves, why am I doing this? Why do I want to escape?

So what I find people will do, and I used to do this myself is they'll say, "Oh well, I drank a bottle of wine. That's bad. But I spent yesterday all day organizing my house. That's good." I want you to consider that these two activities can look completely different on the outside, but they can at times be fueled by the exact same belief, and that's what matters.

Numbing is always fueled by the belief that you can't handle whatever's going on and you can't handle how you're feeling. It's the mistaken belief that you need distraction, you need escape, when in truth you don't.

Now, I think it's a totally valid question if you're wondering or thinking to yourself, "Well listen, if I can escape, why not do it? Why not distract myself from how I feel?" You're the only person that can answer that for you, but what I want to offer is that what I have found in my own life and with all of my clients is that invariably, people reach a point where the escape ends up causing more harm than the original problem.

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So maybe you told yourself that grief was too much to bear, but now you've been drinking a bottle of wine every night for the last six months. And that's created a new set of problems for you. The escape starts becoming its own problem.

But also, just to be clear, no matter what we have been led to believe, we don't actually get a fast forward button on life. Numbing doesn't actually work in that way. Sure, you can do your best to distract and go unconscious and not think about your thoughts or feel your feelings, but guess what, they're still there. They're all just waiting to be dealt with and processed. They don't just magically go away. Your thoughts and feelings don't just magically self-destruct after some set amount of time of trying to ignore them.

And then all the distracting and all the escaping, it often leads to new problems because now you're beating yourself up for how much you ate or drank, or you're exhausted from overworking, or you're upset at the number that you see in your checking account, or you're disconnected from your friends and your family because you've been so focused on trying not to feel.

So I want you to consider what does this have to do with waiting? What does this have to do with feeling stressed out because you hate not knowing what's going to happen? And there really are two primary reasons why someone wants to escape, why someone will say I can't handle not knowing.

The first reason is the belief that there's nothing that you can do to change what's happening, and so you feel kind of helpless. So maybe it sounds like, well, I can't make this virus go away, or I can't change the course of the election, or I can't reopen the economy. So you feel helpless, and then you want to escape.

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The second reason that people end up wanting to escape is if they tell themselves that how they are feeling is too much to handle. So whatever emotion that is coming up for you, maybe you say it's too strong, it's too overwhelming, it's too much, it's too scary, it's too terrible, it feels awful.

The problem is that drinking, eating, binging on Netflix, working long hours, all of it, it doesn't fast forward life. It just adds more helplessness and overwhelm to how you're feeling. Because then you wake up the next day and you're no better off than you were the day before.

You haven't suddenly decided overnight, oh hey, guess what, I can handle whatever comes my way. You haven't learned how to not feel overwhelmed or freaked out by your emotions. In fact, you probably wake up feeling more anxious. Maybe regretful, maybe kind of blue.

And you've likely taxed your body in the process. This is not a win-win scenario. So then what are you supposed to do? If it's fueled by this belief that there's nothing you can do and you feel kind of helpless and that how you feel is also too much to bear, so what are you supposed to do while you're waiting?

The goal really is to stop the what ifs. It's to stop the overwhelm. All the what ifs and overwhelm connected to what if I get bad news, what if I get sick, what if the election doesn't go my way. What ifs are ground zero for catastrophizing.

The lower brain just goes head first into worse-case scenario when you give it a thought like what if. Because that's what the brain was designed to do. It was designed to spot danger. That's why what if ends up being kind of ground zero for catastrophizing.

I like to think about it this way. I like to think about my lower brain being a doomsdayer. So it's always chattering about how everything is going to be

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awful and it's the end of the world. My lower brain loves to hang out in this place. It loves to hang out where things are terrible and I feel like I'm dying.

And listen, sometimes awful, terrible things do happen and people do die. But you know what I've found? If given a chance, my lower brain wants to set up shop in terrible, awful, everything's a mess all day long. That's where it feels most comfortable being.

The human brain is really good at being a doomsdayer if it is left unchecked. Just think about it. Throughout human history, humans have declared the end of days was just around the corner over and over and over again. And as a species, hundreds of times we have predicted the end of the world. But you know what, our failure rate at this prediction is 100%. We have 100% failure rate. We have never been right, but that doesn't stop us.

Now listen, this is not to say that you need to walk around and pretend like there are no problems in the world. This is not to say that you should be pretending that everything is hunky dory and I'm so blessed and I have all my basic needs met and I have nothing to complain about.

No. I spent over a decade working in human rights. I believe that we need to change the world. I believe that we need to fight for people's rights and improve how people are treated. I believe that injustices are real. We can't sit back and close our eyes to them.

But that is very different than catastrophizing. Stopping catastrophizing doesn't mean you become a Pollyanna and pretend that everything is wonderful. What I'm talking about is stepping into a place of just being present with what is actually happening because that is a place of power.

Stopping all the what ifs doesn't mean that your brain is now going to believe that everything is going to come up roses. Some things are not

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going to go as you planned. You may not get the result that you want. People are going to get sick. You will get sick. People will die. You will die.

Sometimes the person that you want to see in charge is not going to be the person that's put in charge. The question is how are you going to show up when that happens? When things don't go the way you think that they should, what then?

Because that's the only constant in life. Life is going to unfold in a way invariably that you think is wrong. What are you going to do then? That's the work. Trying to hit fast forward in life by numbing, the wait, or telling yourself I can't handle this, I can't handle not knowing what's going to happen, that is not going to help you show up in these moments.

Because at its core, at its foundation, the what if cycle, it's totally centered on this belief that I'm not sure I'm capable of seeing myself through what comes down the pike. When the truth is, you're totally capable. You are capable of so much more than you believe because you have a human brain.

You have a brain that wants to work for you. It wants to find solutions. It wants to solve problems. It's a problem-solving machine. Most of us just don't know what to do and we start spiraling down the what ifs, I can't handle this, I can't handle not knowing, I need to escape. I didn't know what to do. No one taught me.

My brain was just running on autopilot. And autopilot was run away, escape, hide, eat until I felt numb. Too numb to feel. And then when I started drinking, okay, well let's just deal with this anxiety by pouring a glass of wine, or let's just put our head down and just throw ourselves into work and not come up for air, or let's crawl under the covers and try to sleep my life away.

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That's what would happen for me when I believed the lie that I couldn't handle something. Meanwhile, all I was doing was withdrawing from this world. I was withdrawing from myself and my friends and my family and my loved ones.

I was disconnecting from the very thing that I was so freaked out that I was going to lose, which was time on this earth. Time in this place with these people that I love so much. The same world that I so desperately wanted more time in and more experience in, it was all passing me by because I was too busy going unconscious. I was too busy numbing all the time.

You have to remind yourself that you are capable of experiencing it all. You are capable of experiencing the good and the bad and the highs and the lows. And telling yourself that you can't, and then numbing, guess what, it only creates more lows. And then you need to escape those lows, so you numb more and you create more lows.

It's a self-perpetuating cycle. The question is what will it take to stay anchored in this present moment as it is unfolding? And not in this terrible future that your brain has cooked up for you. What will it take to be present in the moment when your brain wants to default to I just can't handle not knowing what's going to happen?

Can you just ask yourself, okay, what's happening around me right now? Not what's happening in my mind. Not what is the future I'm envisioning. What's actually happening right now? What am I feeling right now? Can you create space for whatever emotion comes up?

Honestly, sometimes it's as simple as just putting words to how I'm feeling. I'm feeling anxious right now, but I'm also safe right now. I'm feeling grief, and that's normal. I'm scared and that's okay. I don't need to logic myself out of it, I don't need to tell myself that I'm being silly. I can just acknowledge that I'm having a real normal necessary human emotion and nothing has gone wrong.

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This is how you start to teach your brain that you can handle not knowing what is going to happen. You don't need to escape. Because you start to see, oh, the answer isn't peering into a crystal ball and looking into the future. And it's also not trying to find a fast forward button. The answer is developing a new relationship with myself and my thoughts and my feelings.

And let's just be clear. This is something that I still practice all the time because this work that you are learning here, this work that you are practicing, it is like going to the gym. You don't go for a run once and expect okay, well I did it one time, so now I'm going to be physically fit for the rest of my life.

No. You know that you have to keep working out. The same is true with your emotions. The same is true when it comes to learning how to manage your mind. You can't just allow your feelings once and not numb, and then expect that you never have to attend to them again.

But at the same time, doubling down on eating and drinking and distracting your way through a stressful event, it's not going to work either. It only reinforces this mistaken belief that you can't handle the present moment, that you can't handle whatever might happen, when the truth is you can.

And the last thing I want to add here just to take this one step further is that your lower brain, that part of your brain that's very good at spotting the negative, that part of your brain where the reward cycle is really there, it knows that in the past, when it created a lot of drama, when you went down the rabbit hole of what if, all that catastrophizing proved kind of useful because it was a good reason to open up the wine bottle. It was a good reason to start eating.

I want you to think about this. The lower brain has become incentivized to make waiting and not knowing dramatic because the more dramatic, the

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more drama in the situation, the more negative emotion, the more fuel for the habit.

So the drama of the situation becomes an excuse to drink or eat or escape, and I really want you to think about this. The lower brain is creating extra drama sometimes because then it has the excuse to go get relief. Relief in the form of highly concentrated rewards.

Now, this does not mean that how you feel isn't real or isn't true. What it means is that your brain was designed to spot the negative, and we unknowingly make this pathway stronger by teaching the brain that negative emotions are permission to eat and drink whatever we want.

Just considering that your brain might be doing this, it can have you start to examine these kind of worst-case scenario thoughts in a new light. You can start to ask yourself, is this actually protective? Is this actually helpful or is this my lower brain trying to find a reason to escape into a bottle or escape into a pint of ice cream?

I just want you to know that today and tomorrow and next week and next month, no matter what is going on, no matter what you are waiting for, I want you to consider that you're 100% capable of navigating what happens. Whatever emotions come up, you can learn how to make room for it.

This is not about being a Pollyanna or telling yourself to be happy or to stop reading the news and pretend like nothing bad is happening in the world. This is about learning how to make room for how you feel and deciding how to respond. Because we can carry multiple emotions at once. We can feel anxious and purposeful. We can feel angry and resolute. We can feel sadness and empowered.

So then what thoughts do you want to practice on purpose? If you know where your brain is going to go on default, what do you want to practice

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instead? Maybe it's I can see myself through whatever happens tonight. I know how to take care of myself. I know how to do what's best for me. I know how to take care of my family. I'm safe right now. I'm safe in this moment. I can allow this feeling without running away. I can use my brain to help me navigate any situation.

And most importantly, maybe you just want to practice I don't need to believe the lie that I can't handle how I feel, that I'm not capable of seeing myself through whatever happens, and I don't need to believe the lie that I need a drink or I need to eat because I can't handle not knowing.

That's it for today, my friends. You've got this. 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.