

Ep #233: Drinking Because of Unexpected News



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Rachel Hart

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You are listening to the *Take A Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, episode 233.

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, my friends, we are talking about unexpected news today. And you know what I'm talking about. Life is going along, everything's good, and then wham, news that you were not expecting just comes out of the blue and it can feel like you were blindsided.

And what I have found in my own experience and my experience of working with thousands of people is that the moment of unexpected news is when the urge to drink can come on so strong. And so it's so important that you understand why this happens and how to handle it.

Now, I will tell you, in my case, I in these moments have both the urge to drink and the urge to smoke because I smoked for many, many years. And they both kind of tap me on the shoulder at the same time and they're like, hello, we see that you got this unexpected news, would you like to join us over here?

So I want to talk to you today about how to handle this because these moments really can derail a lot of people when it comes to changing their relationship with alcohol, changing their relationship with cigarettes, with food, with anything. And I don't want it to derail you.

So we're going to talk about what is actually happening when you get unexpected news, why these urges can really feel different from your kind of run-of-the-mill five o'clock I'd like to have a drink, why it feels different, and also how to respond. I'm going to show you how to respond without

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running to the liquor cabinet or hopping into the car to go buy a pack of Parliaments, which is I will tell you, what my brain wants to offer up to me in these moments.

So first let's talk about what unexpected news is. Maybe it's getting fired, maybe it's getting a call that someone's in the hospital, maybe it's finding out that money you've been counting on isn't going to come through, or that your carefully planned vacation just went out the window.

It really can be anything. Whatever the news is, what you need to know is that it's not the news itself. It's not the unexpected news that triggers the desire to drink or smoke or eat or whatever coping mechanism comes up for you, although it truly does feel that way in the moment.

One moment you get this news that you are not expecting, and the next you're like, okay, let's go get drunk. I watched this happen to me recently and I was like, wow, it really did feel like it happened in an instant, which of course you hear me talk over and over again about the think-feel-act cycle.

It feels like it happens so fast that there wasn't a thought there, there wasn't a feeling, I just all of a sudden had this urge. But the beauty of what I'm teaching all of you and what you can start to practice is that the think-feel-act cycle, it's always happening, it's always in the background.

And even if you can't see it, even if it feels like it happened in a millisecond, which it did, you can still hit rewind. You can still slow down and examine what's happening and see, yeah, there was a thought there, there was a feeling. It was just so fast, so automatic, and so unconscious to you that you didn't see it. But once you do see it, then you have the information that you need to decide to do something else.

So I'm going to talk about what happened for me because I did this podcast episode because unexpected news came up for me recently, and so did all the urges. So my business right now is growing, we are in the process of

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bringing on new team members, which for all of you out there who have ever been involved with this, you know it requires a lot of interviews and hiring tests and checking references.

And once you bring someone on, you got to get them set up on the backend of your business, all your systems, and then you got to actually onboard them so that they can work in the business, they can work in the company. And it's so exciting.

I'm so excited that my business has been at this point over the last year really, but it takes a lot of time and energy and staff resources and actual monetary resources to do all of this. So we had a brand new team member who had just started. We were so excited to bring her on.

And then she announced that she was leaving suddenly. So she went almost through her entire first full month of onboarding and job training, and she sent me a Slack message to say that she had decided to take another job and she was giving a week's notice.

Now, I will tell you, this my friends, was unexpected news. I did not start out my day thinking like, "Huh, I bet a brand new team member who I'm really excited about is going to just leave." And what happened, I want to back up a little because I, in my own coaching work, have been doing a lot of self-coaching around certainty and uncertainty.

And the fact of the matter is people love certainty. We love knowing what's going to happen. And we try to avoid uncertainty in so many parts of our lives. And if you are like me and you are a person who has a lot of anxiety, it may mean that you go to great lengths to try to build certainty into your life in big and small ways.

And I have really had to do a lot of my own coaching around this because no matter how many plans and routines and schedules I have, it just seems

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like uncertainty is a fixture of being alive. So I will tell you, one of the ways that this shows up for me is I often want to drive the same way.

Once I know how to get somewhere, I like that way. Then that's my preferred route and I want to go that same way. And I remember when I met my husband, so we met each other when we were both living in New York City, but we met three weeks before he was about to move to San Francisco, which was not great timing.

But our relationship at first was pretty much long distance and I would visit San Francisco every couple of months in the beginning of our relationship and he would pick me up at the airport and I remember after a couple times of doing this, I was like, I don't know what it is, I really cannot make heads or tails of this city.

Every time we're in the car, it's just like nothing looks familiar. And I remember he said, "Oh, that's because I like to go a different way every time because I like to explore." And I remember looking at him just being like, what are you talking about? What do you mean you like to go a different way every time?

I would never do that on purpose. It was just mind-boggling to me. Because one of the ways that I have tried to deal with anxiety in my life is by creating routines and telling myself hey, I know where I'm going, I know what to expect.

But the truth is no matter all of your plans and routines and maps and schedules, uncertainty is a fixture in being alive. We don't know what is going to happen today. I want you to really think about that. We don't know what's going to happen.

We don't know how much time we get, we don't know what's going to happen to our loved ones, we don't know what may come tomorrow. And

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making peace with that uncertainty, I really think that that is our job as humans.

Making peace with this uncertainty and telling ourselves that's okay, because it's making peace with the human experience. Knowing that everything could change in an instant. And so what do we do then?

What I have started to do is saying, okay, instead of just relying on going the same way and making all these plans and having all these schedules, I can focus on letting the world be uncertain because it is and it's outside of my control and focus instead of what is within my control, how do I want to show up right now, which brings me back to the unexpected news that I got.

I had to start asking myself, okay, how do I want to show up in that moment? Because in that moment, the urge was right there. And so the question was really, Rachel, do you want to go out and grab a pack of cigarettes? Do you want to go downstairs and open up the liquor cabinet? Or do you want to show up in a way that you can feel good about?

Now, let me be clear. This episode, it's not about shaming or judging you if you do choose to eat or drink or smoke or get high or do whatever when you have unexpected news. It's simply about showing you that you can slow things down, you can ask yourself why it happened. You can examine if you don't like how you showed up in that moment, if you don't like the choices that you made, you can learn a new way forward.

Because coping mechanisms, this is really important, coping mechanisms are not good or bad, right or wrong. They're just ways that we have unconsciously learned how to survive. And everything that I want to teach you in this podcast is let's choose instead consciously, how do I want to survive? How do I want to show up for myself in these moments?

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And that really brings me back to what happened in my situation. I got this unexpected news, I got a Slack message from this employee saying that she was quitting, and she was going to be gone by the end of the following week. And almost immediately my brain offered up, “Well, I don’t know, that’s good as any reason to get drunk.”

Which is so funny listening to that thought now because it sounds so silly, right? It’s so silly like, oh okay, so someone’s leaving the business, you’re going to go get drunk, really? But the reason why I wanted to share this example with you is because I really want all of you to see that this is the work that I do too.

I am still always working at managing my mind. I think we have this fantasy, especially with our teachers that oh, they just do it right all the time, they don’t have any desire, they don’t have any urges. They’re always perfect. We have this fantasy that we can wipe our brain clean.

Now, don’t get me wrong, I used to have so much desire to drink. I used to have so much desire to have a cigarette and so much desire to overeat. And it is totally shifted for me. Now for me it’s like, once in a blue moon that I will have a thought, especially about drinking or smoking.

But I will tell you, it’s always related to unexpected news. So I won’t necessarily have the desire or the longing if I’m out at a fancy restaurant or if I’m hanging out with friends who are drinking. But in these moments of unexpected news, those urges sure will appear and I want to talk about why that happens.

What was happening for me in that moment when I got that Slack message? I will tell you, in that moment, my brain registered the words on the screen as danger. I went into fight or flight. I was having an immediate nervous system response that was basically saying your survival is on the line, you’re going to die.

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Again, this sounds so overblown when you talk about it with some distance, but when you are in the moment, you are in it. It is really easy to listen to someone describing going into fight or flight over a Slack message and say, God, that's so silly. It doesn't seem logical.

But you have to remember that we have logic at our disposal, but that doesn't mean it's always accessible. We also have this reflexive, automatic survival part of our body, and when you're in it, you're in it. And I will tell you, in that moment, I was in it.

And if you, like me, have practiced responding to these moments of panic, these moments of fear over the course of your life by looking for something outside of you to help you cope, then of course you're going to have these urges.

So in my life, I just think about growing up. First it was food. If I was scared it was like, okay, can I find something to eat? Then when I went to college, alcohol started to come into the picture, and then it was cigarettes. And by my 20s, it was all three at the same time. I needed everything to try to help me cope.

And it was only because I didn't know what to do with this nervous system response in my body. No one had shown me how to handle it. No one had really even talked to me about it. I didn't know how to soothe myself, and so I did what was modeled around me, what I heard and watched and saw adults do in real life and on TV and in my environment.

Have a bowl of ice cream, you'll feel better. Have a drink, you'll feel better. You want to have a smoke? That will calm you down. We are so used to using external things to calm ourselves in these moments simply because no one shows us another way.

And that's what the think-feel-act cycle is. It's another way to really calm yourself that doesn't lead to waking up the next day like, ugh, why did I do

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that? Now it's like you have the unexpected news and then you have also the repercussions from how you tried to deal with it.

So let's just really back up here. Let's unwind it. Initially, I got this Slack message, I read the words, and then this urge came up like, oh my god, if ever there was a reason to drink, here it is. But because I have been doing this work and I practice using the think-feel-act cycle, I could pause and say wait, it wasn't just Slack message equals let's get drunk. There was something in between, what was it?

And I said to myself, oh my God, I just feel terrible right now. So it was like, okay wait, so there's a Slack message and there was me feeling terrible, which I think is an emotion and I think that emotion is fear, and then I had this drive to like, hey, let's go get a drink.

Now of course, I didn't see the think-feel-act cycle through. I didn't then go downstairs to our liquor cabinet because I was doing the work to really unwind it. And it took me kind of getting up from my desk and getting out of my office and getting a little space to really kind of unwind it even more and be like, okay, so why am I feeling afraid? What's going on? If it's not the unexpected news, if it's not the Slack message, what is the thought creating the fear?

Because a Slack message just doesn't create fear and the desire to drink, right? So I had to really back up and really start to understand what's going on there and of course I found this thought, "This is a nightmare. It's going to take forever to try to find someone new." And those beliefs, those thoughts which were so fast and so automatic that I didn't even see them, I couldn't see them at the time, that's what was creating my fear.

And that fear, which I so practiced responding to like, okay, let's find something outside of me to make me feel better, that's why I had the urge to drink. I had to spend time though with that initial reaction to figure out what was happening beneath the surface.

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But I will tell you, it is so powerful to see the think-feel-act cycle at work, to realize you can pause and really figure out what's happening, even though it feels like it's this reflex. To really see, oh, it's not the unexpected news why I have this urge to eat or drink or smoke or whatever.

What's causing it is this fast, automatic knee-jerk response that my brain gave me which was this is going to be a nightmare. We have to take over from our unconscious minds' story making ability. Your brain is always going to come up with meaning. It's always going to apply meaning to whatever is happening, whatever news you are getting.

And if you don't choose a different story, if you don't leave that original story that it comes up with unquestioned, those thoughts are going to wreak a lot of havoc in your life. And of course, if I were to listen to a thought like, "This is going to be a nightmare," and feel that fear and in response to it go to the liquor cabinet or head to the pharmacy - isn't it so weird by the way that you can buy cigarettes at a pharmacy?

Sorry I was just thinking like, where did I used to go get them? Duane Reade, at the pharmacy. Seems so weird. Anyway, I didn't do that. But had I, then it would have caused all the secondary problems for me because then you feel awful the next day and you spend all this time drinking and eating and smoking and trying to numb how you feel instead of actually problem solving.

And one of the things that I've really been practicing is how I talk to myself about my emotions. I really try to get as clinical as possible. Because that I find helps turn down the temperature. Instead of staying in the place of oh God, it just feels terrible, or even staying in the place of this is fear, even when I say that, oh God, this is fear, I feel a little afraid.

What I have been really practicing is saying this is a normal nervous system reaction and I'm totally safe right here and right now. And that just turns down the volume a little bit. I don't magically feel instantly better

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because the hormones and the adrenaline and all of that has already been released into my body from that lower brain's initial reflexive response.

And all of those hormones and adrenaline, they have to be processed. But what I'm doing when I get really clinical is I'm not stoking the fear. I'm not creating more of it. I'm not making it worse.

Sometimes I find when you have a strong emotional reaction, you have to do the work of practicing allowing it to be there and to process through your body. Most of us are not used to doing it. I certainly did not have a lot of practice doing it before I started really working with the think-feel-act cycle.

So sometimes what I'll do is I'll remind myself, I'll use the analogy of okay, just picture that you just drank a vial of fear. There's liquid fear and you just drank it up. The fear is in your system. You can't undrink it. Your body has to process it.

And it's so funny because it's almost a little bit like drinking a bottle of wine and then expecting that you could immediately clear the alcohol from your system. No, of course you can't do that. Your body needs time, your liver needs time. Listen, the same is true when it comes to your emotions.

Your body needs time to metabolize all of the hormones that were released, especially in those moments when you go into fight or flight. You cannot just make yourself undrunk by snapping your fingers or thinking a new thought and you cannot make yourself unafraid or unsad or unangry by snapping your fingers and thinking a new thought. However, you can think thoughts that will really help you manage it and not add to it and not create more of it.

But it will take time for you to process the emotion. In that time however, that's when you get to decide how you're going to respond. And I will tell you, it makes your problems and your emotions, you just go through them

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so much faster because you're not creating secondary problems and secondary emotions that are just kind of adding to the pile.

You aren't creating all the negative consequences because you tried to eat and drink and smoke away how you were feeling. And now your body has even more to deal with from everything else that you were consuming.

In these moments, for me, it's just like, okay Rachel, how am I creating the fear that I think I'm observing? Because what that helps me recognize is yes, there was that immediate nervous system response from that unconscious thought, all of that happened, but then beyond that, if I continue allowing that thought to be unquestioned, if I continue to mean that the fear in my body is unbearable and terrible and I can't handle it and it's too much, then I'm actually creating more of it. I'm creating the very thing that I think I'm just observing.

And with that information, suddenly you see the role that you play. And that is what is so powerful. I really do think that urges in these moments, they feel different because they're connected to such a primal response. So when you get unexpected news and your brain unconsciously makes it mean that something is really wrong and you're in danger, and you go into fight or flight, your body's like, oh my God, we got to find safety.

And of course, if you have practiced over the years dealing with fight or flight and dealing with these strong nervous system responses using external substances and it did temporarily numb how you felt in the moment, your body and your mind is going to remember that.

And it's going to think, maybe this is a good idea. I mean, I just think of all the times in my life where I had unexpected news. Maybe I got dumped by someone out of the blue, or someone died, or I didn't get the job that I was sure I was going to get, or I found myself in debt, or a family member ended up in the hospital. All the times that I got unexpected news in my life and my initial response was eat, drink, smoke my feelings away.

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I have practiced doing that for so many years and so it's no surprise when it happens now even though that's not how I respond, it's no surprise that the urge appears again. And I think for so many of you listening, I really want to drive this home. I think that honestly, the most harmful part is not the fact that you had the urge to drink or the urge to smoke or the urge to get high or to whatever.

The most harmful part is being surprised by the fact that the urge is there and then making it mean that all of the work that you're doing isn't working, that you haven't actually changed the habit. It doesn't mean that you haven't changed the habit at all.

To me, when these urges appear when I have unexpected news, it's like oh Rachel, this is the deep work. This is retraining your brain how to respond in a new way when you're in your strongest nervous system reaction, when you're in those moments of fight or flight.

And I will tell you, this to me is how I create certainty in an uncertain world. Because certainty, it doesn't just happen. It's not bestowed upon you one day. Certainty to me is something that actually doesn't even exist without the human mind. It's just a choice that you make. It's a thought that I choose that I'm going to decide how I'm going to show up right now.

So I choose certainty by choosing, you know what, I'm going to freak out and I'm going to have my back. I'm going to be confused and I'm going to have my back. I'm going to be scared and I'm going to acknowledge it. I'm going to tell the truth of what's going on and I'm going to have my back.

And I can always return to the think-feel-act cycle. I am certain about that. That will help me pause and choose what to do next. And then it makes your urges have so much less power than if you go and choose more fear and choose numbing and choose hiding and choose trying to not feel your feelings, which PS, it's kind of impossible.

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I think people so often, myself included for a long time, look for certainty, especially when they embark on the process of change, like, am I going to figure out my drinking? Am I finally going to figure out how to stop overeating? Am I ever going to be satisfied with my life?

And so what ends up happening, we go on this hunt for certainty thinking that it's there outside of ourselves, not realizing that it's inside of you. And so we are looking for someone else to tell us that it will be okay, or to give us all the steps.

But that search is just a search for unproductive reassurance because if you think that certainty is outside of you, if you don't realize that you're the one creating it, you're always going to be searching for it. You're never going to feel like you actually have it.

So for me, it's like, I don't need any more steps. I've got all the steps. All the steps that I need are the think-feel-act cycle. That's it. You've got all the steps that you need to change your drinking, change any habit in your life. Think, feel act. You just have to stop telling yourself that you need some certainty that you'll be able to do it and start realizing, no, I'm the one that creates it.

So for all of you getting unexpected news, I want you to know this, I love you, I know how hard it is, I know how difficult it can be in the moment, but you can learn how to pause. If I can do it, you can do it too. You can go into fight or flight, you can go into that freakout, and you can still slow down and examine your mind and unwind what is happening there.

You can teach yourself how to do it and not head straight for the liquor cabinet or straight to the fridge or straight to a pack of cigarettes. You can do it because you have the think-feel-act cycle. Your goal, remember this; your goal is not to just get rid of your nervous system response or to never be afraid again or never go into fight or flight because I can promise you, all of those things are going to happen in your future.

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And if that's your goal is to never feel afraid, never go into fight or flight, never have a strong nervous system response, then you will end up drinking because you won't be learning how to actually react differently. The goal is to change how you respond in these moments. Not to make it so you never feel fear.

And how you respond in these moments, how you respond to your nervous system and fight or flight and feeling afraid, that's always within your power. So when you get unexpected news, pause. Start working your way backward. Let yourself feel the feeling.

Remind yourself, use the analogy, it's like you just drank a vial of fear and you got to let it work its way through your system. Your body's got to metabolize all those hormones, all that adrenaline. But you can let that process happen and not make it worse by seeing that it's your thinking, it's your thoughts, it's that unconscious meaning that your brain assigned to the unexpected news. That's the real problem. Not the news itself.

That's what's creating the fear and that's what's driving you to think that the solution is to numb. That's what's creating the urges. Just remember, no matter what, you're going to be okay. You can handle unexpected news. Trying to eat and drink and smoke your way out of it, it's not going to work.

But if you chose to do that, that's okay too. You can still pause and rewind and figure out what went down. I'm certain that you can handle it. Alright, 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 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.

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