

## Ep #142: Insuring Your Brain



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Rachel Hart**

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## Ep #142: Insuring Your Brain

You are listening to the *Take A Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, episode 142.

Whether you want to drink less or stop drinking, this podcast will help you change the habit from the inside out. We're challenging conventional wisdom about why people drink and why it can be hard to resist temptation. No labels, no judgment, just practical tools to take control of your desire and stop worrying about your drinking. Now, here's your host Rachel Hart.

Well hello everyone. Talking with you guys about something really important today and a little strange. It's called insuring your brain. I just started thinking about this idea and this concept and what it means to insure the brain because I have been watching a documentary on Netflix all about Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft. It's called Inside Bill's Brain.

And it's really fascinating. I highly recommend it. So you guys are already probably very familiar with Bill Gates. He revolutionized computer software. He amassed a vast fortune and now he's actually giving the majority of his wealth away through the Gates Foundation. And that's what the documentary really looks at, both the beginnings of Microsoft and what he is doing now to revolutionize things like toilets and clean energy. It's really interesting.

But early on in the documentary, he was asked, what is your biggest fear? And he pauses for a moment and he says, "I don't want my brain to stop working." And it's so interesting to think about this man and everything that he has done and the value that he places on his brain. But I think that the value that he places on his brain is no different from the value that we all place on our own brains.

We want our brain to work. It is incredibly, incredibly important to each and every one of us. I think about this a lot just in the types of healthcare conversations that I have had to have over the last couple of years of my life, whether it was with my grandparents or my parents or my sister, or when my husband and I wrote a will together.

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We had to have these conversations about okay listen, if something happens to me or to you, what do you want your life to look like? If you are unconscious and you're only staying alive through life support, what do you want?

And at least everyone in my family has said I don't want to live that way. I don't want to be technically alive but have my brain not working. And not be conscious, not be able to think and connect with people. And it's so fascinating that the fear that Bill Gates has I think is actually the fear that so many of us have.

But then here we are, so intent on preserving the ability for our brain to work and to function, and then it got me thinking okay, well what are we doing to actually protect and strengthen the brain? What are you doing to ensure and insure that it's going to be something that you can rely on?

I will tell you that for most people, the answer is they're doing very, very little to protect the brain. Maybe not even doing anything. Because you know what, that was my answer for a very long time. Yes, I thought my brain was incredibly important but I wasn't doing anything to help it.

And that to me is so fascinating because here it is that we prioritize our ability to think and reason and remember and make decisions and problem solve, but then we're not doing anything to actually preserve and protect these capabilities. We are just allowing the brain to run on autopilot, to run on habit and routine.

That's what I did for so long. And you know, when the brain is running on autopilot, when it's just routine and habit, I talk about this all the time on the podcast. That is your lower brain. And when your lower brain is making decisions, it cares about three things. Find pleasure, avoid pain, and do so as efficiently as possible.

It cares only about the immediate moment. It doesn't care about what you want to do tomorrow or next year or your long-term goals, or your vision of your future. It just cares about being efficient and doing what you've always

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done. And that's what's happening when you have a habit around drinking. You're allowing your brain to run on autopilot, and that is going to fly in the face of what you want when it comes to protecting and preserving your brain.

The last couple episodes of the podcast I've been talking all about health and how important it is to think about health in a new way. And I see this come up with so many of the women who are in my Take A Break program who are doing this work of challenging their brain and challenging themselves to take a break from drinking for 30 days, not just to cross days off a calendar but to really learn what's going on, to really problem solve.

And so many of them are saying oh my god, I didn't understand that I started drinking as a way to manage not just how I was emotionally feeling but how I was physically feeling. I had someone post in there yesterday who said I didn't realize it until I listened to one of your podcasts that my drinking totally started, the habit started when I went through menopause.

So I've been talking to you guys about optimal health, this idea that you have to actually learn, you have to teach your brain how to manage your health in a way that doesn't cause additional problems. Because optimal health is not what it sounds like. It's not I never get sick because that's impossible. You're human. You live on this planet. There are viruses and bacteria and pathogens. You're going to get sick.

It's about managing how you respond to illness and pain, and so often, I will tell you how I used to respond to illness and pain was by turning to something that I could eat or drink, and throwing myself a little pity party. Well, if I feel this bad, might as well have something to drink, might as well have that pint of Ben & Jerry's.

Because I feel so crappy. That's what happens. So you have to teach your brain a new way to manage your health, in a way that doesn't cause additional problems, but not only that, you also have to make sure that you're not in health avoidance. You're not ignoring the physical symptoms that are basically saying hey, it's time to go to the doctor, but you're not

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going because you're afraid of what you might learn or what you might hear.

You have to get out of health avoidance if you're just not being honest or truthful. Maybe with a doctor, but maybe even with yourself about how much you're drinking, how much you're consuming. Health avoidance can even look like not wanting to step on the scale, not wanting to see that number.

So optimal health is important, health avoidance is important, and I really think that insuring your brain is the other crucial piece of this. And that's what I started thinking about when I was watching the documentary on Bill Gates. How do we insure the brain?

Usually we think of insurance as okay, I got to protect against financial loss. I got to protect against the loss of my house or my car or other valuables. Or you might think about insurance in terms of life insurance. I got to make sure that if this member of my family dies and if I relied on that person's earnings, then that life insurance is going to protect me from financial loss by providing a payout in the event of someone's death.

But what about insurance for your brain? What are you doing to write a policy to protect your brain? It is really the one thing that no one out there says oh yeah sure, you can just have my brain stop working, no biggie, doesn't really matter to me. I want to lose my cognitive function. Nobody thinks like that.

But yet no one is really or very few people are really thinking about how to protect against cognitive loss. And that's what I want you to start thinking about. What are you doing to strengthen your brain and what are you doing right now that is weakening it?

Most of you are doing a lot of things that inadvertently are weakening it, and not just when it comes to drinking. I'm going to get into that in a little bit. And the majority of you are doing very little to strengthen it. You're just kind of crossing your fingers and hoping that nothing bad happens.

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When you think about strengthening your brain, I love the analogy of the dangers of being sedentary. Now, we are starting to have awareness and understanding in our culture that sitting all day long has all of these really negative health ramifications because the body is meant to move a lot. It's not meant to stay seated 90% of the day.

I've heard people talk about how sitting is the new smoking, and it truly for many reasons is one of the biggest threats to your health is being in a chair all day long. People will spend more than half of their waking hours – this really blows my mind – more than half of your waking hours sitting down either watching TV, driving, or sitting at a desk at work or at home.

I know in my own life that I have been guilty of this as well. How much time I actually spend seated. And on the surface, it can seem like okay, so exercise is the cure. I just have to make sure that I build exercise into my life. But you can't offset 10 hours of stillness with one hour of exercise.

And so a lot of the research that I've been doing has been talking about it's not just about exercise. It is about creating a movement-based lifestyle. So you don't just focus on exercising three times a week or for an hour a day, but you think about how can I build movement into everything that I do?

Because exercise, going for a run, lifting weights, going for a swim, riding a bike, that's just one part of movement. But movement is the entirety of what the human body can do, and that can be as specific as the ability of your eyeballs to look from side to side and up and down, or your lungs inflating, or the ability to play thumb war with another person, or standing up on your tippy-toes so you can reach the glass on the very top shelf.

There are so many ways when you think about what movement is that you can start to see it's incorporated in all these different ways in your life and we get into these movement ruts and movement patterns. We get into habits and we have to break out of them.

When I was doing the research for today's episode, I came across someone who said you weren't designed to sit all day long because the

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body is a perpetual motion machine. And I love that analogy with the brain because the brain is not meant to be in habits all the time. It is a perpetual problem-solving machine.

It's not just I have a brain so I can solve a problem once and then be done solving problems for the rest of my life. No. It's supposed to solve problems for you all the time. But what happens is we just get more and more into habit and so we start running habitual thoughts, 90% of the time we're not spending a lot of time problem solving.

I want you just to think about how much humans had to think to stay alive. How much they had to think and problem solve and try new things and feel uncomfortable and step outside of their comfort zone just to find food and water and shelter and warmth. All of these things. But now, we live in a modern world that has so many benefits. But one of the negatives is that we are not forced to problem solve. We are not forced to use our brain the way that it was meant to be used.

Think about how many times you have maybe commuted to and from work and you're so able to do it as a habit that you almost lose track of driving. You forget that you drove from point A to point B. It's like you arrive home and you think like, oh god, how did I get here? Because you were just off daydreaming. Because the habit of driving is so routine.

But of course, that's what we're also doing with drinking. We stop the process of problem solving. We go to that party and we feel awkward and we pour a drink. We get the buzz and the brain's like, oh, problem solved. Let's just make a habit out of it. And so we're not problem solving.

Hey, how else could I cope with feeling awkward? Or we come home from work and we're stressed out and we're anxious and we head to the kitchen and we uncork a bottle of wine. And the brain thinks okay, problem solved. And we're not challenging our mind, our brain, to come up with new ways to solve these problems. So our brain is not being strengthened. The habit is actually weakening it because it makes us less capable in the long run.

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Now, when I'm talking about insuring your brain, we can go down a rabbit hole about whether or not alcohol is good or bad for you. There is so much controversy out there about moderate drinking and whether or not it's harmful or protective.

I'll tell you two things. One is there's this really interesting study out of the UK that tracked healthy participants. So not people that were dependent on alcohol. Healthy participants for 30 years and they looked at two things. Alcohol consumption and cognition.

And what they found after 30 years was that even moderate drinking actually led to adverse brain outcomes. Notably, your hippocampus, the part of your higher brain that is really crucial for a lot of things but really with learning, it atrophied. It actually shrunk.

So that was one thing they found. They also found a decrease in white matter in your brain. Now, white matter is just the tissue that contains all your nerve fibers in your brain. So it basically allows different parts of the brain to talk with one another. And when that area is compromised, your ability to think quickly, to walk in a straight line, to not fall down, all of that is compromised.

And they also found that the risk of your hippocampus atrophying, it actually was increased at levels that are below what is considered moderate drinking in the US. There was one researcher who had a quote in one of the articles I read and he said listen, there's no controversy that alcohol damages the brain. It's just a question of what level of alcohol results in damage.

And I thought that was a really interesting way to think about it because I haven't necessarily thought about it in that way before. But if you just swap out the word alcohol and put in another word, like mercury, you can say listen, there's no question that mercury damages your brain. It's just a question of what level results in damage.

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That to me is a really fascinating way to think about it. Now, you guys all know, when I talk to you about this, it is not to convince you that alcohol is a poison and evil and you should never drink it. It has been a part of our society, human existence, for the last 5000 years.

And you can go down these rabbit holes online about people arguing back and forth. It is protective, is it not protective? Is it actually harmful? I think that really, the only thing that matters for you is what results are you getting? Yes, don't wear blinders. Pay attention to studies. Pay attention to what you read. But what results are you getting?

Because in some ways, it's like okay, so who cares about a study that went on for 30 years in the UK? What results do you have when you wake up in the morning? What results do you have when you come home every day and you open a bottle of wine, or when you go out to a party and you drink way more than you intended?

And you already know the answer to that, but that's where you need to focus. So when you think about how do I insure my own brain, it's not just don't drink. I actually don't think that that is the answer because so many people will stop drinking and they won't have any of the tools to feel better.

And this is where I was for a long time. I would stop drinking and I would feel physically better, but I was feeling like I was suffering emotionally. And being miserable is not particularly beneficial. Because maybe we can look on a brain scan and say well, your hippocampus is doing great and your white matter looks beautiful, but what about your emotional wellbeing?

A brain scan isn't going to show us that. You aren't just a brain. You are a living breathing human with a full emotional life. The only problem is that no one has shown you how to manage it. And so if you're going to think about insuring your brain, I think you have to really consider the emotional wellbeing component as well.

Because yes, exercise matters for the health of your brain. Diet matters. Your blood pressure, your blood sugar. These things all matter. But you

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know what matters more than all of these things? Mental stimulation. Because mental stimulation is the opposite of habit. You aren't doing what's routine. You are doing what is challenging when you're being stimulated.

Activities that are mentally stimulating actually help build connections between nerve cells in your brain. It can help to generate new cells in the brain. This is what I'm talking about when I'm talking about plasticity in the brain. The idea that your brain is actually pliable and flexible. It can learn new things.

But when you're just stuck in habit and you're doing habit over and over and over again, you're losing that pliability. You're losing that flexibility. Rather, you're making this organ that has the ability to change and grow and learn new things, you're just allowing it to harden and calcify.

So if you want mental stimulation, yes of course you can read and you can take courses and you can do word puzzles and math problems, and of course things like drawing and painting and crafting, anything that requires some sort of manual dexterity and mental effort and creativity, they are all going to help with mental stimulation.

All of these things are going to help you. I just think about my grandmother Ruth who is 96 years old. She lives in an assisted living right now. Her husband passed away a couple years ago, so she lives by herself. And I was talking to her a while back about what she does every day.

And she has this whole list that she goes through. She does her crossword from the Hartford Current in pen, which is crazy to me that she does a crossword in pen. She reads a certain number of pages in her book, she knits a certain number of rows in her knitting project, and she plays bridge.

Her day is all about mental stimulation and she's so sharp. But mental stimulation, you can get it in little bits through all of these things, but you can really get it when you learn how to manage your mind. You learn how

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to apply the think-feel-act cycle as a tool. Then you are getting so much mental stimulation every single day.

I see it with all of the women who are doing my 30-day challenge in the Take A Break program. It is so much mental stimulation. They are really challenging themselves that for some of them, they kind of freak out and they say, Rachel, I don't know what I'm doing. I think I messed up. I feel really uncomfortable. I feel really confused. I feel really unsure.

And I'm always like, great. You are right on track. You're not supposed to know what you're doing yet. You're not supposed to have it all figured out because you are problem solving. You're solving the problem that the habit has been solving. You're solving the problem of how you feel. So this is all good. It just means you're on the right track.

Because you know what's happening when you're in the habit and you're doing the same old thing and you're coming home and you're pouring the wine and you're going out to dinner and you're drinking and you're not questioning the urge and you're not questioning the habit and you're not asking your brain to do anything new.

It might feel comfortable but your brain is just calcifying. Just because you are comfortable doesn't mean that it isn't causing problems. I think about this a lot with my own movement habits. I think about how much time I spend seated in a chair. And so as I've been trying to build more movement into my own life, one of the things that I have tried to do is how can you sit in different ways? Can you sit on the floor? Can you kneel? Can you squat?

And when I first started doing this, I was just like ugh, this is the worst. It is so comfortable sitting in a chair. I don't want to sit on the floor. I don't want to squat. I don't want to kneel. I don't want to sit cross-legged. I like sitting in a chair. But of course, that's because my body had kind of calcified. I had sat in a chair so often and so frequently that it was almost like my body was molded in a chair shape.

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But the more that I do this, the more that I practice sitting in different ways, yes, I have to fight my brain a little bit who wants me to only do the comfortable things, that's what the lower brain cares about, but the more I do it, the more comfortable it's becoming.

And I'm starting to find as I spend more and more time seated, especially seated on the floor, which by the way, helps a lot when you have a little kiddo, so I'm closer down at his level, it's actually more and more comfortable. I'm actually starting to enjoy it.

And listen, this is what you can do with changing the habit of drinking. You're going to start out and you're going to say but it's just so much more comfortable to have the glass of wine and to drink when everyone else is drinking. And to drink on Friday or at weddings or whatever it is for you.

But all that comfort is actually working against you. And when you take a break, that is the mental stimulation, that is the very thing that is actually working to protect your brain because your brain has to start problem solving in new ways to solve the discomfort.

And so when you think about insurance for your brain, there really are three keys that you have to do in order to increase mental stimulation on a daily basis. The first is you got to break out of routine and habits. What can you shake up?

Maybe you drive the same way every day, maybe you always use Google Maps to tell you where you're going. Maybe you order in when you could be cooking. Maybe you sit on the couch and watch TV in the evening when you could be playing a game. And maybe you're pouring yourself a drink. Find what are your routines and your habits and start practicing getting your brain off autopilot. That is the beauty and the power of taking a break in your life.

The second thing is find opportunities to learn. Now, when you learn how to take the think-feel-act cycle and how to use it as a tool, by using the self-

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coaching model, which is what I teach people in my program, you have an opportunity to learn every moment of the day.

I am watching my brain at work all the time. There is no shortage of learning about myself. There is no shortage for you to learn about yourself because your mind is vast. And so you don't have to look far for opportunities to learn when you start the practice of using the self-coaching model, using the think-feel-act cycle, and managing your own mind.

And then the third piece that is really key is that you have to start courting discomfort. A lot of you guys are running away from discomfort. That's what I did for a very long time. Discomfort felt like an emergency. It felt like I needed to do anything to avoid it.

But listen, if you're feeling uncomfortable, that is good. It means your brain has the opportunity to learn something new, to learn how to handle the situation in a new way. If you feel outside of your comfort zone, then good. That's not a bad thing. That's a good thing. And this is a huge thing that I work with the women in my program on.

You just have to reframe discomfort. We're so used to seeing it as a warning sign and a problem and you know, a message to go back into the cave. And really, it is the exact opposite. So these are the three things. Break out of the habit, the routine and the habitual, find opportunities to learn, and there is no better way than when you are learning how to manage your own mind, and court discomfort.

Use discomfort as the thing that can help you evolve rather than the thing you need to hide from because when you hide from discomfort, I promise, you stay stuck in habit and you stagnate. So I wanted to talk to you guys about insuring your brain because I think so many of you have not really thought about how you can create mental stimulation in your life and how taking a break from drinking can be that kind of mental stimulation that you need to preserve the very thing that you say that you want, which is for your brain to keep working.

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Insuring your brain is actually going to be something that I'm covering in the optimal health course that I am teaching in the Take A Break program all this month. So if you are interested in joining the 30-day program where you take a break from drinking, if you join in October, you're going to have access to this month-long course that I am teaching about optimal health.

It really is the key because it's not just our brain but it's our health that we say is such a valuable asset. But yet, we do so little to actually protect it and take care of it, and in fact, many of the habits that you develop actually do the opposite. And so that's what you end up learning.

Not just how to break the habit, not just how to manage your mind and how to change your relationship with discomfort, but how to use all of this material to start to create a different type of health for yourself. To create optimal health, to get out of health avoidance, and to start insuring the most valuable thing that you have, which is your mind.

So listen, if you want to go through this process live with me all this month, make sure you go to [rachelhart.com/join](http://rachelhart.com/join) so you can sign up for the 30-day program so you don't miss any of it. But either way, think about how you can create more mental stimulation in your day-to-day life. That is how you can create an insurance policy for your brain. I can't wait to see you guys inside. See you next week.

Okay, listen up, changing your drinking is so much easier than you think. Whether you want to drink less or not at all, you don't need more rules or willpower. You need a logical framework that helps you understand and, more importantly, change the habit from the inside out. It starts with my 30-day challenge. Besides the obvious health benefits, taking a break from drinking is the fastest way to figure out what's really behind your desire. This radically different approach helps you succeed by dropping the perfectionism and judgment that blocks change. Decide what works best for you when it comes to drinking. Discover how to trust yourself and feel truly powered to take it or leave it. Head on over to [RachelHart.com/join](http://RachelHart.com/join) and start your transformation today.

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