

Ep #174: Urge Work



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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 174.

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. I'm going to tell you, I've done 174 episodes plus a bunch of bonuses. And today was the first time that I forgot to hit record. What was I doing? I don't know, but I got, I don't know, three quarters of the way into this podcast and realized, "Hey, nothing is recording."

But you know what, I've talked about this on the podcast before because I've had instances where I haven't forgotten to hit record but I have sometimes sent my producer audio where he has come back and said, "Yeah no, this isn't going to work." I just told myself what I have told myself in the past. It is always better the second time around, and so it will be. This second recording will be better.

Alright, so we are talking about urge work today. Learning how to deal with your urges is one of the most important things and one of the most essential things that you will need to do, especially at first when you're learning how to change the habit. And not just the habit of drinking but really any habit.

And I have so many of you guys who will write in and you'll say, "I'm obsessed with the think-feel-act cycle, I love finally understanding how my brain works and how habits work and how my thoughts and my feelings and my behaviors are all interconnected. And I love the analogies that you talk about like the urge being a toddler in your brain where all it cares about is that immediate gratification, but you also have an adult. You also have

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your higher brain, the prefrontal cortex that can start to learn how to supervise the toddler.”

And so people are really excited about these concepts, but then they try to start practicing them and they say, “I don’t get it. What do I do exactly step by step when I feel the urge?” And I’ve been thinking about this a lot. I’ve been thinking about how to really distill down what I teach into very, very simple steps.

And you know what, you can apply this with any kind of urge in your life. But I’m going to give you a three-step process today that I believe really is the most simple way that I have ever explained how to deal with the urge to drink, the urge to eat, the urge to really do anything. The urge to touch your face.

I love thinking about how important these skills are right now because I have thought so much in the last couple months when we’ve been getting all this information about the coronavirus and how we shouldn’t be touching our face because our hands are really a vector for transmitting the virus to ourselves, and it’s so fascinating how I’ve been able to take all the urge work that I’ve done and learn so quickly not to touch my face when I was touching my face all the time.

So that’s really what you’re going to be able to do once you start to practice the three-step process. But before we do that, I really do want to just do a little bit of a refresher on urges, especially since some of you may be new. Reframing how you think about the urge and the urge to drink is incredibly important.

So urges are really just an emotion that is intensely driving you to do something. And the reason it is driving you to do something is so that you will feel good. So when you think about the urge to drink, it’s this emotion of desire that is driving you to go pour a drink, pick it up, and drink it, so that your brain will be rewarded with pleasure.

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You can think about all your urges in this way. It's a drive to do something so that you will get a reward. Now, here's the thing; urges are not a problem until you decide to say no to them. It is not uncomfortable to want a drink and then have a drink. It's not uncomfortable to have an urge to drink and then tell yourself, "Yeah, as soon as I get home, I'm definitely going to do that."

That is not uncomfortable. So really, the urge isn't the problem. It's what happens when you tell your brain, "No, we're not doing that." When your brain all of a sudden has this knowledge, wait, what, we're not going to reward ourselves right now? We're not going to say yes? That resistance that is then created, that really is the problem.

And I will tell you, most people go to battle with the resistance by using willpower. And willpower - listen, it can work for some period of time. Some people, myself included, can even use it for a pretty long period of time. In my early 20s, I spent an entire year not drinking solely using willpower.

I didn't know anything about the think-feel-act cycle, I didn't know anything about how my brain worked or how habits worked, but I understood how to say no and I did it for an entire year. And I got good at saying no, but you know what happened? The habit didn't change at all. It really didn't.

Because I was only practicing saying no. I wasn't understanding what was fueling the habit and what was driving the habit and how my thoughts and my feelings were connected to my desire. I thought my desire was all just about the glass of wine on the table. I thought that my desire was all about the alcohol. I didn't understand how I was the creator of it.

So you can't rely on willpower in this moment when you feel the urge and you decide to say no. You can't just say I'm going to resist and white-knuckle it and grit my teeth. You have to actually move to a place of curiosity because only then can you teach your brain that, listen, urges aren't a big deal. I don't need to be fazed by them.

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Urges are totally normal because it's hardwired into the human brain to seek out pleasure. Pleasure is part of that motivational triad that helped humans stay alive. Find pleasure, avoid pain, and do so as easily as possible.

Now, that helped humans go seek out food, go seek out warmth, go seek our shelter and sex. Things that were necessary to keep our species alive. It is not necessary to drink to keep the species alive. Alcohol is totally unnecessary for human survival, but the urge to drink, it acts as if it is very necessary. It pretends to be necessary.

And I like to think of it like a false alarm. It's like that alarm going off that's like, you got to get up, run from the building, there's a fire, but it's a false alarm. There's no fire there. There's no danger there. You don't have to listen to it. And in fact, the more you listen to the false alarm, the worse your life becomes.

So the problem isn't that urges exist or that you have the urge to drink when five o'clock rolls around or when you sit down at the dinner table or when you start making dinner, whatever it is, whenever it comes up for you. The problem is that you're treating that urge like an emergency, but it's not a big deal. It only feels like one because that lower brain doesn't know any better. It just thinks all rewards are equally important for human survival.

Now, the good news is you've been blessed with a human brain. You're not a rat. You're not just driven by this lower primitive brain. You can make decisions about what you want to do and how you want to think about the urge and how you want to think about this desire, and in fact, learn the think-feel-act cycle and how your brain is creating it.

Because an unanswered urge, that moment when you feel the urge and then you say no, it really just feels like restlessness. That's it. You can handle restlessness. It's not a big deal. You can handle feeling a little antsy, a little kind of like, out of sorts, kind of.

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And it makes sense why you feel restless because of course, the urge is driving you to go do something. So the urge is saying like, go get up out of the chair, go into the kitchen, open up the liquor cabinet, let's uncork a bottle. The urge is saying move, take action. And so when you're saying no and you're not taking action, of course you're going to feel a little restless.

But again, the urge to drink has no power over you. Just like the alarm can't make you run from the building. Urges are powerless without your consent. I'm going to say it again. Urges are powerless without your consent. Your higher brain is what gives consent. But it's also the reason why you don't have to act on the urge, why you always get to decide what you're going to do because you have that prefrontal cortex.

The brain wants to be efficient. It will not keep asking for something that it's not going to get. That is something that is such a key piece to understand. Your brain will start to recognize and realize, "Oh, I guess we don't always do this. I guess we don't always have a drink at 5pm. I guess we don't always have a drink with dinner. I guess we don't always meet up with friends and have a drink." Your brain will start to learn that you don't always do that and it will just want to be efficient, so it won't keep asking for that reward.

Now, the choice for you is really simple. The urge appears and you can say yes to it because you're telling yourself it's a big deal and it feels horrible to say no and you're so uncomfortable. You can say yes to the urge and strengthen the habit, or you can choose restlessness.

You can say no and you can feel a little uncomfortable, but know that all that drama inside is really no big deal. The ability for you to feel restless, to basically hear that false alarm and not run from the building, that is the key. The more your brain learns that it doesn't need a drink in the situations where it believed that it did, the less it will want it. That's how you eventually start to extinguish your desire.

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Now, doing this requires that you have to start showing up with your urges in a different way. You have to start to allow them. I talk about allowing urges quite a bit, and allowing simply means that you're being present with your mind and your body. You're opening up to what is happening.

So many people will say - and this is where I got hung up for a long time, "Just tell me how to feel less restless. Just tell me how to get rid of the urges." But you can't skip this step because as long as you believe that restlessness is a big deal and it's an emergency and it's a problem, the more that you will run from it.

You have to teach your brain, hey, it's not a big deal, it's not a problem, I can handle this. I was built to feel restlessness because every human is. So the trick isn't to make it go away. It's to get better at handling restlessness so your brain can learn, oh, that's not a big deal, that's just how I feel when my lower brain believes that it's supposed to have a reward but I know we're not doing that.

So you really can notice that urge as a thought. "I want a drink, I need something, I need to take the edge off, I want to join in." You notice it as a thought. You decide to say no, and then you get curious. And the reason to get curious, the reason to invite the urges in is because they have all the information on the habit's inner workings.

The lower brain can want a drink as much as it wants one because all it knows is find pleasure, avoid pain, and do so efficiently. But it can't get that drink without the higher brain's consent. That inner toddler can throw a tantrum, but you have an adult to supervise the toddler. You have your higher brain that can take charge of the primitive brain. That's why you're so powerful to change the habit.

So let's talk about exactly what you need to do in the moment when you feel the urge. I'm going to go through this three-step process. Now, I've been thinking a lot about how to really distill it down, and I thought about

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how pretty much everyone I know, everyone I meet, we all seem to know what to do if we were ever to catch on fire.

I know that sounds crazy, but we do. Like, oh my gosh, if you catch on fire, you stop, drop, and roll. We all learn this. We learn this at a young age. I remember practicing this as a kid. Now, I have never caught on fire. I do not know anyone else that has caught on fire, but my brain knows what to do. I need to stop what I'm doing, I need to drop to the ground, and I need to start rolling in order to put that fire out.

I'm going to tell you this; what you're going to do with the urge is really very similar. It's stop, drop, and breathe. And I'm going to go through each one of these steps. Now, the first step, stop, it seems pretty self-explanatory, right? So you notice the urge, you notice the desire to have a drink or to have another, and you have to stop. You have to pause.

But of course, this is going to take practice because you are not practiced pausing. You are very practiced acting. You are very practiced at very quickly saying yes. Your lower brain doesn't want you to pause. It doesn't want you to think. It doesn't want you to stop. It wants you to act on the urge immediately.

So just stopping is going to be at first, challenging in and of itself. Now, the big mistake that people make is when they stop, they try to use willpower. So most people know, okay, if I want to change my drinking, I'm going to have to stop drinking so much. So we know that first step in the process. We know we have to stop.

But this is where most people make their biggest mistake is that they try to stop by gritting their teeth and clenching up and just saying no over and over again. And the problem is that willpower is just trying to shove your desire into a closet, lock the door and throw away the key. But it doesn't work like that. Your desire is just going to be banging and banging and banging and trying to get out.

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Think about how you say no when you're using willpower. It's not peaceful. It's not gentle. It's, "Ugh, no, no, no, no, I'm not doing that, I'm not having that tonight. No." You may not be saying this out loud but you're saying it on the inside. And the energy that you have, it is energy of resistance, of pushing, of stress.

Think about really just even right now, say no the way you would with willpower. No. Just as I did that right now, I could just feel all this clenching, starting in my mouth, kind of down my esophagus, into my chest. I could feel my body closing up.

That's the exact opposite of what you want to do. Because that just has you using more power, more energy, all this resistance. It doesn't feel good. When you drop into what that feels like, you see it does not feel very good. You can stop and you can say no, and it doesn't have to be through white-knuckling it and gritting your teeth.

You can say, "Nope, we're not doing that right now, we're not doing that tonight, no thank you." You can hear the energy, the difference of energy in my voice. That is what is possible for you too. Again, you may not be saying this out loud, but you are definitely saying it silently to yourself.

And do not be fooled for a second to think that there isn't energy behind how you are saying it to yourself. Saying no, stopping, pausing, saying no in a way that is peaceful takes practice. We are not taught to do this. We are taught just to dig into self-discipline and self-control and resistance.

And I want you to do the exact opposite. Because when you have to use a lot of resistance and control, what you're doing is you're basically saying I have to meet power with power. But the drink doesn't have any power, and the urge certainly doesn't have any power, so why do you need to meet it with power?

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You're essentially - when you use that kind of level of energy, you're telling yourself, you're reinforcing this belief that the drink and the urge is really powerful when in actuality, it's not. You don't need to resist it so strongly because it doesn't have any force. That's really what is one of the biggest mistakes that people make.

They don't realize that not only does willpower shut you down from understanding how the habit is working, because again, it's like you're trying to push your desire into a closet and then throw away the key. But it just reinforces this erroneous belief that the drink and the urge are powerful when they're not at all.

So that's step number one. Stop. Step number two is also drop. Just like stop, drop, and roll, except here you're not rolling around on the floor. You're dropping into your body. What's happening in your body right now?

Now, this is not where most people want to go. This is not where I wanted to go. I didn't want to feel my body. I didn't like how I was feeling in my body at that moment. I didn't like the anxiety or the insecurity or the awkwardness. I didn't like how I was feeling so I didn't want to go into my body.

But again, that's what you need to be doing. You need to drop into the container where you are feeling the emotions that right now you are trying to escape by having a drink. And listen, that emotion might just be deprivation. When I say that you're escaping an emotion by having a drink, it doesn't mean that you're by yourself, feeling really sad, really lonely.

It could be that, but sometimes it's really just trying to escape the emotion, the sensation of deprivation in your body. But that's not a big deal. It's not something that you need to run from. And you can only learn that by dropping into your body. This is not what people want to do.

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People always say, “Okay, can I distract myself? Tell me what to do. Give me the things, the steps that I need to do so I can distract from this urge.” But no, I want you to go to where you are feeling it. I want you to go to your body. It’s not about keeping yourself so busy so you don’t have to feel what’s happening, you don’t have to think about what’s happening.

Because again, that just reinforces that the urge is powerful when it’s not. I’m going to tell you this; dropping into your body, noticing what’s happening in your body when you say no to an urge, it’s a skill, but I think it’s a tremendous skill for a lot of women because so many of us have spent many, many years, if not decades, not wanting to be in our body.

I didn’t want to be in my body. I spent the longest time hating my body and feeling let down by my body. I always felt like I was in a constant struggle with my body and I was trying to change it. I was constantly picking it apart and seeing what was wrong with it.

So the idea of dropping into this place that frankly, I didn’t really like, that at first was really challenging because it was asking me to start to make peace with this container that I had so often been at odds with. I was always judging my body negatively and trying to change my body, and then also trying to escape my body, escape how I was feeling.

But when you start practicing dropping into your body, you are going to discover so much about how the habit is working. I will tell you one of the things that I discovered was that I was holding my breath. I was so tense. I was holding my breath. I wasn’t allowing myself to breathe. I was often kind of - even though I was feeling so antsy and so restless, I was trying to hold myself as still as possible as a way to not feel.

But the more that I got familiar with my body, the more that I taught my brain, “Hey, you can be here. You can be in your body and not hate it and not resist it and not want to change it, you can just observe it, you can look at it, you can watch what’s happening, you can watch what your breath

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feels like, what your heart rate is like, what your temperature is like, you can watch how your torso feels from the front to the back, you can notice what's happening in your jaw and your forehead and your throat and your hands and your feet," the more that I was able to start to observe my body, not only did I start to really assert my authority over the habit and over the urge, but I started to transform the relationship that I was having with myself. With what I saw in the mirror, because I wasn't always at war with it.

The more I practiced this, the more I realized that how restlessness felt in my body, how anxiety felt in my body, how awkwardness felt in my body wasn't really a big deal. The solution wasn't to rid myself of these emotions and their accompanying sensations. The solution was to teach my brain that they were all harmless. Not a big deal at all.

Dropping into your body, it is the place where you are trying to escape when you're having that drink. And so dropping into it is the exact thing that you need to be doing. And then that's where the third step comes in. So it's stop, drop, and breathe. Stop, drop, and breathe.

That's the power. Because when you activate your breath, you remind yourself that you're in control. You are going to breathe regardless. We can't prevent ourselves forever from breathing. We can certainly have very shallow breathing, but you're going to unconsciously breathe whether or not you like it.

But you can take that unconscious breathing and turn it into conscious breathing. You can start to direct it. You can start to say, "You know what, maybe I'm not going to breathe so much in my chest, but I'm going to drop down into my belly." When you are feeling anxious or stressed or annoyed, your unconscious breath is tight. It's small. It's shallow. You're not getting a lot of oxygen in.

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The same is true when you're using willpower. Just test it out in your own body. Test out what it's like when you say no. Everything where you would be taking a breath, it all clenches up. But when you decide to breathe on purpose and that is the key, it's on purpose, you start to exert power.

You start to show your brain, hey, I'm in charge here. I understand what the habit wants, I understand what the lower brain wants, but I'm deciding to take a breath right now. I'm deciding to breathe slowly and exhale slowly, which by the way, starts to slow down your heart rate.

So if you're feeling a little restless, a little antsy, a little anxious, you probably are noticing that your heart rate is a little elevated. So this helps to bring it down. It also brings oxygen to your brain, where all your mental processing is taking place, so you have more fuel essentially to start to really examine what's going on with the habit.

But also, step three where you decide to take a breath, it gives you a place to focus. Instead of focusing on the drink or focusing on the urge, you start to again, focus on your body. First you dropped into your body to see what it was feeling like, and now you can focus on it because you're taking a breath.

It's about reconnecting with yourself. That's what happens when you decide to breathe on purpose. You reconnect with yourself. You reconnect with your body; you reconnect with your mind.

And the habit, it's all about disconnecting. I think this is the biggest thing. So often, we have this belief that drinking is about connecting, but it's not. It's about disconnecting from how we feel. It's about disconnecting from our body. It's about disconnecting from our present moment because we're saying this present moment isn't good, I need it to change.

I don't like how I feel in this present moment because I don't like feeling deprived or I don't like feeling annoyed, or I don't like feeling like the odd

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man out. And this, stop, drop, and breathe, is all about reconnecting. Reconnecting with yourself, reconnecting with the present moment, reconnecting with your power.

Stop, drop, and breathe. It brings you back into your body but it shows you how to really step into your ability to decide at any moment what you are going to decide to do and what is right for you. Please, please, please, I know that this sounds deceptively simple. Practice it. Try it out.

Notice the resistance you will feel. Notice how it won't be easy at first. But again, it's just like going to the gym. If we're going to get stronger, we have to do the reps. We have to practice this. It's not enough to just hear me talk about this on the podcast. You have to actually put it into action in your own life.

So this is really your urge work. Not just to reframe your understanding of the urge, but to know that all you need to do is stop, drop, and breathe. And that alone can change everything for you. Alright everybody, that's it for today. I will 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 and start your transformation today.