

Ep #193: Why Do I Have a Habit?



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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 193.

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. We are going to be talking about the habit of drinking today and why you may have created a habit. So we'll talk about what exactly a habit is, why they're hard to change, unless you have the tools that I teach, but also, and I think kind of most importantly, why not everyone develops a habit around drinking.

This really was my question for such a long time. Why me? Why did I struggle with my drinking? Why did I develop a habit? Why not my partner or my best friend or my sibling? Why me? And I know a lot of you also struggle with that question as well, so we're really going to do a deep dive into that today.

But first, let's just talk about habits. You have heard me say this before over and over again on the podcast, but habits are a normal part of being human. You can think of the habit as a pathway that the brain is following to make a decision.

Now, the brain evolved to form habits because we learn through repetition. We learn through doing something over and over again. So if you want to learn how to ride a bike, you got to get on the bike and ride it over and over and over again. If you want to learn to speak a new language, same thing. You got to practice using the words and forming sentences and doing it many, many, many times.

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Now, with enough practice, these skills start to become automatic. They start to be habitualized. Everything that you had to remember and memorize, all the steps needed to do something, they become part of your unconscious mind and that is a good thing.

You would not want to lose the ability to form habits because that would make everything in your life incredibly difficult and incredibly time-consuming. So being able to do things unconsciously is a good thing. It's what makes humans really efficient, and being able to do things unconsciously saves your brain energy.

And that's what the lower brain, that survival part of your brain, that's what it really cares about. It wants you to be efficient because the more energy you can save during the day, the more energy you have to use to survive. That's what the lower brain cares about. It cares about staying alive.

And so the unconscious nature of habits really is essential to being human. It's extremely useful. Not just to survive. It's useful to be able to drive your car and carry on a conversation. It's useful. But the only reason that you can do these two things at once is because your brain took all the practice of learning how to drive, all the hundreds of steps that are needed to operate a car, and do it effectively and not crash.

And it was able to turn it into a habit. You were able to start doing it without really realizing that you were making decisions, but of course you were making decisions. Now, the problem is trying to change a habit. Most people, most of us want to keep the habit of driving a car. We like the reward that we're getting when we're able to drive. We're not trying to get rid of it.

But most people do not like or do not want the habit of drinking too much or overeating or spending hours and hours swiping on a screen. But all of those habits, just like the habit of driving a car, they've become

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unconscious. And most of us don't know how to access our unconscious mind because no one teaches us. So what do we do?

We end up trying to change habits using willpower and brute force. We aren't taught to examine how the habit formed and to learn how to take it out of your unconscious. And look at how it was formed and use your conscious mind to actually change that framework. That's what the think-feel-act cycle is all about. This is about what I teach.

Bringing awareness to the habit so that it doesn't stay stuck in your unconscious mind and you don't stay on autopilot. Because driving on autopilot is one thing. Drinking on autopilot is another. I think this is really the first place where people start to question what I teach because it makes sense when they start thinking about drinking in terms of a habit.

And they hear me say okay, habits are normal and everyone's brain was designed to form habits. But then how come not every human brain has a habit around drinking? Why do I find myself drinking too much or struggling to say no and this other person doesn't? If habits are so normal, Rachel, why am I saddled with this?

That was really a question that I had for such a long time. I couldn't make sense of it. And everything out there in the world, what I saw, what I was learning from how we talk about drinking and people's relationship with alcohol was oh, it must be that there's something wrong with you, there's something wrong with your brain, you just have a brain that can't handle alcohol.

But I really want you to consider it in a different way. I want you to consider that the reason why you may have developed a habit around drinking and that someone else who drinks doesn't really boils down to three reasons. Repetition, reward, and your foundation. I'm going to explain all three of these.

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When you have a habit around drinking, your brain is still making a decision to drink. It's just that the decision can be hard to access. But it's there. It's really easy to convince yourself that it's not there. It's really easy to convince yourself that pouring the glass of wine just happened, ordering another drink just happened. You just couldn't help yourself. It was too tempting.

But you weren't making a decision. You weren't thinking. And in fact, a lot of people say that a lot. I don't know what happened last night, I wasn't thinking. You were thinking. You were just thinking unconsciously. That's what you want to develop the awareness around. That's what we use the think-feel-act cycle for, to reveal the decision, to reveal the thought that led to saying yes.

Because your actions don't just appear out of nothing. They are always connected to a thought and a feeling. It might be a thought like I want it, I deserve it, this will be fun, this will help me be fun, who cares, one more won't hurt. I mean, there's so many.

So remember that you are making a decision. Right now, it's okay if you can't see the decision. Just means it's unconscious. That's what you're going to use this work to help excavate and uncover. Because the habit is like a pathway that the decision follows. And the think-feel-act cycle is how you start to uncover that path once the habit has become automatic and unconscious.

So let's talk about why not everyone who drinks develops a habit around drinking. The first thing that I want you to consider is that habit formation depends on how many times you walk down the path. So imagine that you're staring out at a meadow of tall grass and flowers that no one has ever walked across before.

And the first time you set out across the meadow on your journey, there's nothing for you to follow. You have to create your own path. You have to

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watch where you're going. You need to pay attention to where you're walking, where you place your foot.

So it's taking energy and thought as you walk across. But now, if you walk across that meadow many, many times, you're going to start to wear a path across it. Your footsteps will start to wear away at the vegetation, so you will be able to travel across the meadow much more quickly and with much less attention.

You won't need to think so much about where you're going. You can let your mind wander a little bit. The action of walking across the meadow will start to be really easy. It won't require a lot of conscious attention from you.

Now, this I think makes sense to a lot of people when you think about habits other than drinking. So if you think about learning how to tie your shoes or ride a bike, at first it takes a lot of attention and mental energy. Your brain is literally laying down a pathway in your brain to figure out, hey, how do I do this? How do I master this skill?

But as time goes on and you're practicing more and more, you become more proficient. And that path, it changes from just the hint of a grassy trail to the more and more you practice, it changes to a paved track that you can race down. The pathway is forming through repetition.

So I want you to think about this because I don't think a lot of times people consider this when it comes to drinking. But how many times have you practiced drinking in certain situations, with certain people, when you're doing certain things, at certain times, when you feel certain emotions? Get curious about that.

I practiced a lot and I remember that I had a good friend in college who just wasn't as into drinking as I was. She would join me sometimes but not all the time. She didn't walk down the path nearly as much as I did. Now, it's

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easy to assume okay, well there must have been just a difference in our brains.

And that's what a lot of people assume, that there's something wrong with their brain if they developed a habit around drinking. But what I want to suggest is that we were practicing at different rates because we were learning different things from drinking.

Alcohol was the same, but our think-feel-act cycle looked very different. My habit was fueled by thoughts like, this is how I have fun, this is how I forget all my hang-ups and my cares and my worries, this is how I can let loose and be the real me and stop feeling so insecure and awkward.

Now, her lack of habit was not going to be fueled by those thoughts. It was fueled by things like, I don't really like the way it tastes, I don't really like how I act when I'm drinking, I don't really enjoy feeling like I'm not entirely in control, and I definitely don't like not remembering things the next day or how I feel after a night of drinking.

She didn't want to walk down the path as much I did. She would occasionally drink, but not nearly with the frequency that I would. I was practicing drinking more so my brain was learning more about alcohol and what alcohol did for me and how it was useful and how it helped me and what problems it was solving.

Just like the more you practice, the faster you're going to learn how to ride a bike, the more you practice drinking, the faster you're going to develop a habit because your brain is learning every single time. So you have to start by being curious and asking yourself okay, so what am I learning? Why do I like to drink? Why do I like getting buzzed? Why do I like getting drunk?

Most people really never take the time to honestly answer these questions, so they never go there at all. Or if they do, they just stop at I don't know, everyone does it, it just tastes good. Those answers block them from so

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much information that would help them understand, hey, why do I keep practicing this? What's going on? What's my brain learning?

The second reason why people develop a habit is the reward. What is waiting on the other side of saying yes to a drink? Now, I thought that a lot of good things were waiting for me on the other side. My friend in college didn't agree so much.

So what does your brain think is waiting for you? How motivated is your brain to walk down that path? So if we go back to that analogy of the meadow, if you walked across the field and at the end of your journey, you reached a pit full of snakes, you would probably think, okay, you know what, I don't really want to walk that way anymore.

And if you did walk that path again, the next time, you'd probably do it with a little bit of trepidation and hesitancy, unless you were some kind of snake lover or herpetologist. You're probably not rushing to get to a reward that you don't like. But if you walked across that field and you reached a pit full of golden retriever puppies who were just waiting to play with you and lick your face and jump all over you, your motivation would probably be pretty different.

You'd probably want to get to those puppies faster. You might even walk down the path more frequently because you needed your puppy fix. You might even find yourself walking more quickly with anticipation of what was waiting for you.

I think it's really interesting. I know I'm kind of going to extremes here, but I think it's really interesting to think about what do you think is waiting for you? Now, the other fascinating piece is that the chemical reward in the brain is the same.

My friend and I were both drinking alcohol. Alcohol was activating both of our brains' reward centers. The levels of dopamine were changing as a

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result in our brain. Now, you could say okay, well maybe Rachel's brain had a stronger reward response than her friend's, and maybe that explains what was going on.

But you know what, I think when we go there and we start talking about differing reward responses in the brain or dopamine sensitivity, you actually miss the big picture. You actually miss something that you can access right now that is going to help you change the habit that doesn't require you going in for a brain scan or some sort of invasive testing.

You can spend a lot of time trying to figure out if you somehow have a different reward center that acts differently from other people, which of course, there will be. That can be the case. We have variation in how the brain works because not all humans are the same.

You can do that. I just don't think there's a lot of value in it. It's going to take a lot of time and a lot of energy, and then what? What are you going to do with that information? Or you can skip all of that and you can examine something beyond just your brain structure and the chemical reward. You can examine the emotional experience.

You already know. We all know this already, that alcohol doesn't produce one fixed emotional response for people. Sometimes maybe you drink and you feel relaxed. Sometimes you drink and you feel energized. Sometimes you might drink and feel depressed. Sometimes you drink and feel angry. Sometimes you drink and you cry.

Alcohol is still alcohol. Its chemical composition hasn't changed. What it does in the brain hasn't changed, but the emotional experience can be so different. This comes up a lot when people ask me, well, how is it that you can possibly change your desire? Because we can't change alcohol. We can't change the chemical response in the brain. But you can change your response to the response.

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You can change and understand why you're having the emotional experience that you're having. You can change the level of stress that you feel before you start drinking by looking at your thoughts and understanding why you feel that stress and anxiety in the first place. You can change how lonely or bored or awkward or annoyed you feel prior to drinking.

That's what the think-feel-act cycle can teach you. Not just how the habit was formed and how it's currently working, but it will show you everything. It will explain everything to you in your life. And here's the thing; if you can change your emotions without drinking over them or eating over them, or spending over them, then guess what? Your emotional experience when you do these things is going to be very, very different.

That is really how you can start changing the habit. Now listen, I didn't know how to do any of this. I didn't know how to change my mindset. I didn't know how to feel better on my own. I didn't know how to examine my unconscious.

So the reward I was after wasn't just the chemical reward. It was an emotional reward too. I would think to myself, "How else am I going to enjoy myself? How else am I going to open up and relax and lose my inhibitions and stop feeling bored and stop feeling deprived and not feel like I'm missing out? How else will I do it?"

My brain for a long time only knew one answer to all of those questions. Pour a drink. Consume something. This is why tuning into your emotional state matters so much. And I know a lot of you out there feel like it's a waste of time to talk about your emotions, and I get it because that was me too.

I wanted to stick with the logical stuff. I wanted to stick with what was happening in my mind. I didn't want to go into the realm of my body where I was actually feeling my emotions. All that stuff was too touchy feely for me.

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But listen, your emotions are playing a role in the habit whether you like it or not. So you might as well pay attention to them.

The third reason why you develop a habit around drinking while someone else who drinks might not is because of the foundation you're starting with. So think of what you are actually building the habit on top of. What was already in your brain, what foundation was already there before you ever started drinking?

Now, this is where people assume that I'm talking about genetics or predisposition or the fact that maybe your mother, your grandmother was an alcoholic. That's not what I'm talking about. What I'm talking about is how did your brain handle how you felt and your emotions before you ever started drinking?

Because I will tell you this; many people learn well before they start drinking that the way to change their emotional state is to consume something. To eat something, to buy something, to watch something, to consume something to feel better.

I want you to think about it this way. I did an episode all about how alcohol is an acquired taste. You don't have an innate preference for it. A lot of alcohol is really astringent or bitter, and maybe if it doesn't have much of a taste, it activates your pain receptors. It burns a little bit on the way down, which is why many drinks are served cold and on the rocks, to numb the receptors in your mouth and your throat.

So alcohol is an acquired taste, so why do we want to acquire it and how do we acquire it? Well, why we want to acquire it, that all connects back to your emotional experience, the emotional reward. How you acquire it often starts with gateway drinks.

So most people don't start drinking old fashioned and olive martinis right out of the gate. They start with concoctions that are a little sweet, perhaps

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very sweet, to help mask the taste. So one thing that you can just consider is what kind of habits did you have around drinking sweet things before alcohol ever came into the picture?

Now, this is not going to apply to everyone, but I do think it's interesting to look at because it does apply to a lot of you. I look at my own background. I had a habit of drinking sweet things very fast, very quickly, and a lot of it early on as a kid. Way before alcohol ever came into the picture.

I remember that frozen concentrate that you used to be able to get in the store. I don't even know if they sell it anymore. And we would get this frozen concentrate of lime aid and my parents would make a jug of it and I could just down the entire thing myself. And they would say, "Rachel, you're drinking too fast, too much." I was like, I don't care, I love lime aid.

I drank a lot of soda, a lot of juice, a lot of very sugary things growing up. And I drank them very, very quickly. So there's really no wonder that when I got my first drink, which was probably a mix of grain alcohol and some sticky sweet Hawaiian Punch concoction, my brain was like, oh wait, I remember how we drink very, very sweet things. Very, very quickly.

You can imagine that if it was just straight grain alcohol, I wouldn't have had it with such speed and with such gusto. Now, maybe you can relate to this, maybe not. Maybe you notice that eating quickly and drinking quickly and consuming things quickly started out well before alcohol ever was introduced into your life, but just be curious about that.

How did I consume things before I started drinking? But it's not just the speed. When you're looking at your foundation, when you're looking at what the habit is starting with, more importantly, there's the question of how you learn to deal with how you were feeling before you started drinking.

Because looking back now, I can see I learned to numb my emotions at a pretty young age, well before alcohol came into the picture. I would get

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home from school, I would be feeling really lonely and really sad and kind of bored, and I would eat a lot of food to try to erase all those feelings. I didn't know what I was doing at the time, I didn't know that I was numbing how I felt. I just knew that if I got home and I headed to the fridge and I ate a lot, that I would kind of be able to zone out on the couch and feel a bit better from my day.

So what were your patterns with how you dealt with your emotions before you started drinking? Were you avoidant? Did you numb? Did you try to control things? Were you good at distracting yourself? You really have to be curious about these answers because they are all going to factor into the habit of drinking and the foundation of what that habit was built upon.

Most people that I work with can identify that well before they started drinking, they had a habit of numbing how they felt. They already had that foundation in place. Drinking didn't create the numbing habit. The habit was already there.

Alcohol was able to speed down the path a little bit faster because it was already a well-worn path of trying to escape how they were feeling. This is why what I teach can be so powerful and so transformational because really, once you start doing this work, so many people see, oh, it's not really about alcohol, is it?

The number of people inside the Take A Break challenge who will say to me, "Oh, this has nothing to do with drinking, does it? This is about how I handle how I feel. Feeling deprived, feeling annoyed, feeling restless." And they will notice that even when they take alcohol out of the picture, if they aren't onto the underlying habit of numbing, they'll just replace it.

They'll just replace alcohol with something else. That's why so many people actually flip-flop back and forth between different habits. So they might replace it with eating or shopping or organizing or trying to control

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everything in their life. Changing your drinking is really about changing your relationship with yourself and your emotions.

Of course, the foundation that I had, looking back, it was not the same foundation that my friends had. But when I was examining and trying to understand what was going on at the time, all I could see was what was happening on the surface. I couldn't see what was happening underneath the surface for them. I couldn't even see what was happening underneath the surface for me.

So I couldn't see my friends' emotional state beforehand or their think-feel-act cycle, or how they handled their emotions. I couldn't even see any of these things for myself. All I saw is how much did we each drink last night, who's paying for it today, and why on earth is there this difference? It must mean that something's wrong with me.

That's what I always interpreted it to mean. There must be something wrong with me. I must have gotten the defective brain when they were handing out brains in the brain lottery. But my brain was working just fine. So is yours.

I was practicing drinking because I liked the reward. And I liked the reward because I wasn't equipped to navigate how I was feeling on my own. And that doesn't mean that I was feeling depressed and sad all the time. A lot of what I wasn't equipped to deal with was navigating feeling deprived on my own.

And so because of this, my brain learned that having another drink was the solution. So then my work was simply reversing the process and learning, hey, you know what, I can be the solution to whatever it is that I'm in search of. And that's your work too. That's really what all of this is about.

The think-feel-act cycle, it's just a tool. It's just a framework. It's incredibly powerful, but what's more powerful is you. What's more powerful is the fact

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that you have the ability, I don't care who you are, you have the ability to take what is currently in your unconscious, take that habit, and bring it to your awareness, understand why it formed, understand how it's currently working, and learn how to change it.

And that power is everything. I want that for you. You can have it too. Alright, 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.