

Ep #205: Writing Out the 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 205.

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 talking today about writing down the habit. I cannot stress how important this piece is when it comes to habit change. Because remember, the habit is in your unconscious. It's in that part of your brain that just wants to operate on autopilot. It doesn't want you to think about what you're doing. It just wants you to do it.

And so, if you're going to change a habit – the habit of drinking, habits of overeating, habits of procrastinating, it doesn't matter what the habit is really, if you're going to change a habit, you have to get your brain off autopilot. You have to start bringing conscious awareness to what is going on, and that happens with writing the habit down.

Now, the last couple episodes in the podcast, I have been talking about the pillars of habit change. So, inside the 30-day challenge. I teach four different pillars. And these pillars really are essential. They really create the foundation of learning how to start to manage your mind.

So, we talked about commitment and we've talked about urges and we've talked about understanding your mindset and how your thoughts are so important, what you're thinking about alcohol and drinking and not drinking. And all of that really plays such a tremendous role in the habit. But today, we're going to talk about how you start to write it down, how you start to get it on paper.

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Now, you hear me all the time talk about the think-feel-act cycle, the idea that whatever you do or don't do in this world, it doesn't just happen. It's connected to what you're thinking and how you're feeling and that these three things, they go together. And I think that's a really powerful starting point.

I know it was really powerful for me at first to understand, there's a reason why I do the things I do. There's a reason why I said yes to that drink or there's a reason why I said no, because of how I was feeling and what I was thinking. All of a sudden, that starts to give you almost like breadcrumbs that you can follow and start to really trace a path or understand, "Okay, so this is how the habit is working."

But when you are doing the work of habit change, you have to do more than just listen to concepts. It's wonderful to read books and listen to podcasts and watch people speak and teach classes. All of that is wonderful and I know that that is where my own journey of change started. But it's only going to get you so far because it's one thing to learn about how your brain works. It's another thing to learn how to manage your brain.

It's another thing to really understand, "I'm in charge of this brain of mine and what I do and I can start to shift how I think and that will change how I feel." That, to me, it's like going to the gym. It really is. It's not just reading books about running. It's lacing up your shoes and starting to become a runner.

There's a big difference between reading about running and running. And the same is true when it comes to listening to me talk about the think-feel-act cycle and really understanding how to use it. And that is the final pillar of habit change that I think is so important and so overlooked.

So, the way that I teach it, and the way that I learned to do it is with something called the self-coaching model. So, I want you to think of it almost like – it's almost a little bit like a mathematical equation. It's like a

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formula that you can use to really take the habit, whatever you are doing, you can take it out of your unconscious mind, take your mind off autopilot and start to put it in the formula so that you can make sense of it.

And I think that piece is really important because sometimes when you have a habit, it's hard to make sense of what's going on. On the one hand, you'll say, "I know this isn't good for me. I know it's not serving me. Why do I keep doing this? Why do I keep repeating the same mistake over and over again? It doesn't make logical sense."

And I think part of why that happens is because no one gives us this formula. No one teaches us how to manage our minds. So, we're trying to understand what is happening in our mind but we can't look at it because no one teaches us how to write it out. No one teaches us how to get it on paper. So, that really is what I want to talk to you about today and talk to you about that self-coaching model so you can start to really see, what are the weights that we're lifting?

If I think of learning how to manage your mind as the equivalent of going to the gym and working out your body, the self-coaching model is like the weights that you are lifting. It is how you are really strengthening this muscle of understanding how to look at the world and look at what you do and look at your thoughts and your feelings and your actions and results and see how it's all connected, see the formula that it fits into.

So, what I want you to consider before really diving into this is, first and foremost, that this is always challenging for people. It was challenging for me. I think a lot of times, what happens when I introduce this concept of you have to write the habit out, you have to get it down on paper, you have to put it into this formula.

A lot of this is very new to people. And it will be confusing at first. You will not be sure that you are doing it right. In fact, you will probably start out

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doing it wrong. I know that I did. That does not mean that something has gone wrong, however. That just means you're learning.

So, I just want to say, before we start talking about this, you have got to create space for you to be wobbly and to fall down and to not get it and to scratch your head and to feel frustrated and to feel stuck. All of that has to be part of the process.

If you think, "Oh, Rachel talks about this on the podcast and it makes so much sense and it seems to logical, therefore I should be able to do it, piece of cake," you're going to run into some problems. So, please, if you are starting to do this work, whether or not you're trying to do it on your own or if you're inside the 30-day challenge or the longer work that we do in the advanced classes, no matter where you are in your journey, I really want you to just extend some grace to yourself that yeah, this is hard.

You can't just wake up one day and decide that you're going to run a marathon. You have to train. You have to put in the work. You have to have runs that feel awful. And the same is true when you're doing the work of managing your mind. You have to be wobbly. It's going to be uncomfortable. You're not going to get it at first, and that's okay.

So, I've talked about this in a couple of different episodes on the podcast before, but just to go over this once again, when you're using the self-coaching model, which is the formula that we put the think-feel-act cycle into, when you're using this model, what you're basically doing is breaking the habit into its five components, its five parts.

So, what you're doing is looking for a circumstance, a thought, a feeling, an action, and a result. That's what you're doing with this self-coaching model. Now listen, I know a lot of you are like, but I have lots of thoughts, or I have lots of feelings, or I'm doing lots of things, or my behavior really changes around alcohol, or I feel one way at 5pm and another way on a Saturday and there's just a lot happening there. That's okay.

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It's going to feel a little overwhelming at first because it's like you have an unorganized closet in your house. If you have a closet where you have just shoved a ton of stuff into it. The very first time you open the closet with the intent of organizing it, it is going to feel overwhelming. It's going to be like, where do I even begin? There's so much in here. This is impossible.

But you have to start at that place. You have to start at that place of feeling a little overwhelmed and feeling like everything's a jumble and everything's a mess so that you can start to create more organization. That's what you're doing with your mind when you start using the self-coaching model.

Now, the real truth is that your brain is going to keep thinking what you have unconsciously practiced and it's going to keep thinking the same thoughts that you have unconsciously adopted around alcohol, unless you learn how to do this, unless you learn how to take all of these thoughts out of your mind and put them on paper. That really is what's going to happen.

I can't stress it enough. Your brain just wants to do what it is good at doing, and it is good at thinking all of the thoughts that you currently have about alcohol, all of the thoughts that give you permission to drink, all of the thoughts that tell you, "Okay, one more won't hurt. I'll start tomorrow, no one will know." It's good at doing that.

And unless you start engaging with your mind differently, it will just keep doing that. That's why this last pillar of habit change is so important because your brain just wants to save energy. It just wants to do what it's really good at doing. And right now, it's really good at practicing all the current thoughts that you have about alcohol.

But all of those thoughts are the reason why you're in the habit right now. So, we've got to figure out how to change them. You've got to get it on paper. I know I'm going to be a broken record about this. But I am because I also thought that I could skip this step.

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I watch as my clients think, “Okay, yeah, yeah, yeah, she says write it down on paper. But I can kind of do it in my head.” You can’t. You have to get it out on paper because you can’t change the habit from the place that it was created.

It was first created as an unconscious thought in your mind. So, a thought that you were thinking but that you couldn’t see, it wasn’t written out, you weren’t deciding, “Oh, here are all the thoughts that I’m going to choose to think on purpose about alcohol and about drinking and about how much to drink and giving myself permission to drink.” That all happened at an unconscious level.

So, if you’re going to change the habit, you can’t change it from the place it was created. You have to change it from a new place. And that new place is paper. It is getting those thoughts out of your mind and onto paper, to write it down.

And the reason is not just so you can more clearly see what’s happening. It’s to give yourself some distance. You can’t just think about your thinking. I really want you to consider that. You can’t just think about your thinking. You’ve got to look at it. You’ve got to look at what it creates. You’ve got to look at the feeling and the action and the results that are generated from it. You have to really examine every piece of the model. That’s the only way to start to shift your perspective.

I really think that a sports analogy is a good one here when it comes to why it is so important to kind of slow down and get things on paper. So, sometimes when you’re in a game, you really do need a coach to call a time out. You really have got to get the players off the court or off the field so that they can stop and catch their breath and pause and think about strategy. That is the power of stopping to regroup, so that you can just step back and see the big picture for a moment.

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And that's what I think you're doing when you use the model. It's that you're slowing down. You're kind of calling a timeout. And instead of just letting your brain go on autopilot, you're saying, "Whoa, let's just hang on for a second. Let's slow down. Let's catch our breath. Let's see what's going on. Let's see if we can kind of get a sense of the big picture here rather than what most people want to do when they want to change a habit is just to say, "No, no, no, no, no." Just grit your teeth and try to use willpower.

That's not giving you a sense of what's really going on. That's just mustering your energy to resist desire. But I don't want you to just get good at resisting desire because I don't think it works. I want you to get good at learning how to change your desire. That's when you really change your relationship with alcohol. That's when it's so much easier to say no; when you actually have changed your desire.

So, the habit is you kind of in that fast-paced game. And when you are in that fast-paced game, it's like you have tunnel vision. It's very hard for you to see the entire field or the entire court. It's easy to miss opportunities aright in front of you because you're so intent on changing the score.

It's almost like you just can't see everything around you. So, the self-coaching model is like calling timeout. It really does help you slow down and regroup and see the big picture. And so, that's what I want you to think every time that you're using it is this is me being a coach. That's what I really want for everyone.

I want all of you to learn, "How do I coach myself? How do I become my greatest advocate and my greatest support system and my biggest cheerleader? How do I do that?"

Because I know, for me, that was a real struggle. I wasn't any of those things. I was my biggest critic. I was the person who was meanest to me. I was the person who held myself to the most unrealistic and unreasonable standards. And that's not very fun.

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So, let's actually use an example. Because I think, if I walk you through an example, it will help you start to see how we really look at these five different parts of the self-coaching model; the circumstance, the thought, the feeling, the action, and the result.

Now, the example I want to use is, "I need a drink." And I want to use this thought in particular because I know it comes up for so many people it used to come up for me quite a bit. And it can come up around a lot of issues. Not just around alcohol.

So, I used to tell myself, I need a drink, or I need chocolate, or I need a cigarette. I had a lot of needs in my life that really weren't needs at all. But when I looked at alcohol, which of course is the circumstance here. The circumstances are just the facts of living on the planet. They're not good and they're not bad. There's no opinion or judgment or morality tied to them. They just are the way things are.

And alcohol is a circumstance. It is just part of being alive on Earth. It was here before humans came into being. Humans just figured out how to harness the powers of fermentation. And it will probably be here after us.

So, alcohol is just a fact of being alive. It just exists. It doesn't create your desire. It doesn't create temptation. It just sits there until your brain thinks a thought.

And so, that's a really important thing, just to start to parse that out. A lot of times, what we do is we think, "Oh, alcohol is the reason I have all this desire. It's hard for me to be around wine, or it's hard for me to be around other people when they're drinking, or it's hard for me to have it in the house."

No, it just sits there. It's not creating anything for you until you think a thought. And that alone, I think, is a really powerful thing to start to

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understand, that there's alcohol and then there's your thoughts about alcohol.

Because when you start to see, "Oh, it's what I'm thinking that then determines how I feel and what I do and my ultimate result that I get," all of a sudden, you see, "Oh, I don't have to hide out. I don't have to go in isolation. I don't have to make sure that I'm never around it. I don't have to make sure that all my friends don't drink. I don't have to control anybody's drinking because I can always just focus on what's happening in my mind."

So, alcohol is a circumstance. And, a lot of times, a thought that a lot of people have around it – I had it myself – is, "I need a drink." Now, when I would have a thought like that – which by the way I used to think a lot. I remember when I was living in New York City before I became a coach and I had a nine to five job, I remember a lot during the workday being like, "Oh my god, I need a drink. I've got to have a drink when this day is over. I just really need it."

So, this was a thought that I had a lot. And when I would think that thought about alcohol, it would create this kind of urge. It would create this kind of intense desire to be like, "Oh, god, this will all feel better if I could just have a drink."

Now, what I would do before I learned how to intervene is, I would act on that desire. So, I had this thought, "I need a drink." It created desire. And then I would go out and then ultimately get myself a drink.

So, I would get drinks after work with friends or I would stop by the liquor store on my way home or I would head out and I would have dinner by myself and I'd order a glass of wine. I would act on that desire by drinking.

And then guess what the result would be? Guess what my brain would learn? A lot of times, people want to think that the result is how they feel

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the next day or how they feel in the moment. But that's not actually the result.

When you start to write this down and you start to really, really examine what's happening with the habit, you'll start to see that, in this case, my brain was learning. It was starting to believe that alcohol was necessary to deal with how I was feeling. Because, of course, I was always telling myself that I needed a drink in response to a negative emotion.

So, my brain was starting to learn and it was starting to believe that alcohol was necessary to deal with stress. When of course, it wasn't necessary. It isn't necessary. But I didn't understand that.

I didn't even necessarily have awareness around this thought, "I need to drink." I didn't even really think that it was a thought that I was choosing. I just thought it was a fact. That's why it's important to really separate out your circumstance and your thought.

You start to really see, oh wait, maybe this thing that I'm thinking is a fact, "I need a drink," is not a fact at all. The fact is, there's me and there's alcohol and we both live on this planet. Well, I guess alcohol doesn't live, but you get the point. That's the facts of the situation.

What I'm thinking about it, how I'm telling myself that I need it, that's all of a sudden where my brain comes into play. But, of course, so much of that was happening outside of my conscious awareness.

So, as I was teaching my brain, the way you deal with stress is you go have a drink, guess what would happen? My desire would start to grow because I wasn't feeling stress once in a while. I was feeling stress a lot. I was having a lot of stressful days. And then, I was practicing over and over again that the solution was to have a drink.

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And so, my brain was continuing to feel stressed and then continuing to think that the solution was to have a drink. So, I started totally unconsciously reinforcing this idea that drinking was necessary. I have this original thought, “I need a drink,” and my brain was starting to actually learn that it was necessary because it’s like, “Well, Rachel experiences a lot of stress and this is how we deal with stress, so what else are we going to do?”

That really is the power of starting to write this out and see, what am I truly creating for myself? It’s not necessarily how you feel after having drinks every night of the week or after finishing a bottle of wine.

Yes, that’s part of it, but you start to see that your result has a lot more nuance to it. It really is, what is your brain learning from this thought and this feeling and this action?

So, you write the model out. I remember doing this. And I would start to see, “Oh my god, it’s me that’s making my desire grow. It’s not alcohol that’s making my desire grow. It’s this thought that I keep unconsciously telling myself and believing and acting on all the time. It’s this thought, I need it, that’s the problem.”

So, you start to see that. That’s the first thing. You start to write the habit out and you start to see how that is working. But then what? Like, “Okay, I figured it out. I wrote out all the pieces of the habit. But now what am I supposed to do?”

Now, what I talk to you about all the time is this is where we start to shift your thinking. But – and this really is an important caveat – you have to do it in a believable way. What I teach and what I want you to practice is not slapping positive thinking over a habit and expecting that it’s going to work. It’s not going to work.

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I talk about this all the time inside the challenge. I was talking about this on a coaching call the other day. I really compared positive thinking to trying to squeeze into pants that are too sizes too small, which if you can just imagine how uncomfortable that is. I know how uncomfortable that is. It's so awkward. It's so uncomfortable. It doesn't feel right.

And you know what? You just want to take the pants off. You just can't wait until you can get home and take the pants off. That's, to me, what positive thinking is like; when you're trying to squeeze into something that just doesn't work. It doesn't fit. It doesn't feel comfortable. It's too much of a stretch for your brain.

You have to find a new pair of pants. You don't have to keep wearing the same pair of pants that aren't working for you. You don't have to keep thinking that thought, "I need a drink. I need a drink. I need a drink." But you can't go to the place of, like, "Oh god, this new thought is so uncomfortable. It doesn't work."

You just have to find something that fits a little bit better. And that really is the difference between positive thinking and thought work. It's about making small but believable changes that actually will stick. Because you're not racing to get home and take the pants off.

You're not practicing a thought and then, at the same time, thinking, "This is stupid. I don't believe it. I don't even know why I'm saying this to myself."

I really do remember doing my own work with this thought, "I need a drink." One of the first things that I did was just to replace need with want. It really doesn't seem like it's that big of a change, to replace, "I need to drink," with, "I want to drink." But I will tell you that it made such a profound difference for me.

So, I'd have this unconscious thought appear, maybe at the end of a workday or at a party or when I was out at dinner. I would be thinking to

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myself, “I need a drink.” And in that moment, I would think to myself instead, “Oh right, I don’t need a drink. I want a drink.”

It really sounds like, “Okay, who cares? So, you went from need to want.” But I’ll tell you, this change was everything for me. And the reason was because first, I was reminding myself that this was a want and not a need.

So, it was like dialing down the intensity just a little bit. I mean, I still had all that desire. I still had the want there. but it wasn’t a need. It wasn’t like, “Oh my god, I have to have this or I’m going to die.”

So, that was the first reason why it was so important to switch from I need a drink to I want a drink. But the second reason why this was really important is because it opened myself up to curiosity. So, the thing is, we’re not curious about our needs. Our needs are just needs. We’re not curious about why we need water or food or sleep. We just need them to survive.

But as soon as I reminded myself that this wasn’t a real need, this was just a want that I had, I just wanted alcohol right now, all of a sudden, there was space for me to be curious, “Why do you want a drink right now? What’s going on? How are you feeling? What are you thinking about? How are you believing this will help you?”

I could start to get curious about what was unfolding in my mind. And that curiosity created pause. And that pause started to help me retrain my brain. It really was a very subtle change to go from, “I need a drink,” to, “I want a drink.” But it opened up so much space. And I wasn’t trying to go to this place of, “Oh my gosh, I don’t ever need a drink because I’m an amazing and wonderful human without alcohol.”

Sometimes, I think that’s where we think we have to go with positive thinking. And in that moment, I just would have been like, “No, I don’t believe that at all.” But I could believe, “I want a drink.” That was a very believable thought for me in the moment and it just created a little bit of

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space and a little bit of pause and a little bit of curiosity that actually made a huge difference for me as I was doing this work. And this really is how you start to use the self-coaching model.

Now, a lot of people will say, “Okay, but what am I supposed to do? ‘m supposed to grab a pen and paper, no matter where I am, and just start writing down every time I have an urge to drink?” Of course, the answer is no. I mean, if you want to do that, by all means.

What you’re supposed to do is start exercising your mind. What you’re supposed to do is look at what happened after the fact, or prepare before you head out. Your brain is thinking all the time. It’s thinking all day long. It’s thinking about you and the past and the future and your job and your partner and your family and food and time and your body and your to-do list. It’s just thinking.

And most of us never pay any attention to this thinking. We’re just letting the brain run on default mode. And you know what? Default mode is a big problem because we carry that default thinking around with us day and night, never really questioning it, just repeating the same thought patterns over and over again.

So, even if you were just to do one model, write down one model of really uncovering how your habit works every day, that alone would make a tremendous difference. That’s why I think, you know, that work of writing out models once a day for 30 days, which is part of the 30-day challenge, when people do it, it has a tremendous impact on them.

You think, like, “Oh, but it’s one model. I’m having urges all day long. How is that really going to make a difference?” But because you’re bringing awareness to what is happening.

I really like to think of your brain – it’s a little bit like a computer running an old program. That program is going to keep running unless you purposely

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decide to update it. That's what default thinking is like. The same thoughts that you have had about alcohol and drinking and not drinking and what it means to be someone who drinks and what it means to be someone who doesn't drink, all of that is just going to keep unfolding on default, that program is just going to keep running unless you decide to intervene, unless you decide, "Hey, maybe it's time for a system upgrade. Maybe we are going to start choosing some thoughts on purpose."

This is exercising a muscle that no one has ever shown you how to exercise. It's showing you how to work out your brain. And the beautiful part of it is this is a skill that's only available to humans, to be able to watch ourselves think and to watch how we feel and to watch what we do and to examine it after the fact. That really is something that's just available to the human brain.

And that is really what I think is most important. It's learning how to manage your mind. It's learning how to take what often feels like, "I have no idea why I do the things I do. I have no idea why I drank that much last night. I have no idea why, in the moment, I always believe my excuses." It's learning how to take all of that and understand what's really going on.

Not because you're just saying, "I should know better." Not because you're just saying, "Oh, well it's just illogical." But because you're finally really understanding, "Hey, when I think this thought, how do I feel? How do I show up? What do I do? And what does my brain learn?" That's what you have to really start to master.

Learning how to manage your mind is learning how to feel better. It's the reason you won't need a glass of wine to take the edge off of stress or anxiety or annoyance, because you will be able to start feeling better just by shifting your thoughts in these tiny ways. That's the important thing; making these small changes, bringing these little bits of awareness that start to add up.

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I will tell you, if you can do one thing from today's episode, it would be grab a piece of paper, grab a pen or pencil, and try to write out your own model. Try to look at either a thought you have or a feeling that you have. Try to write it out for yourself and see what it's creating.

It will be challenging. It may not make perfect sense. But this is how you start to learn. You have to have this kind of beginner's mind where you don't really fully know how to do it yet. That's the only way to truly change a habit. That's the only way that you're going to be able to actually redefine your relationship with alcohol.

So, this was the final episode in the four pillars. So, I hope that this really has given you some insight into the skills that you need to practice.

You know what? A 30-day break from drinking, it's incredible powerful for your mind and your body to get a break from alcohol. But it really is so much more powerful to use that time as a way to start to learn how to exercise this muscle that no one has ever shown us how to exercise before. Really learning those four pillars of habit change and learning how to apply them, that's what makes all the difference.

So, for those of you who are ready to get started, I'm going to be doing a special New Year 30-day challenge in January, which is going to start Monday, January 11th. If you're interested in finding out more, all you have to do is head on over to rachelhart.com/january. You can check it out.

But that's really going to be taking everything that I've been teaching you over the last four episodes. It's your chance to really put it into action and not only that, but to get support as you're doing it; to get support from me, to get support from my coaching team, and to really go to the gym and learn how to exercise really something that I think is the most overlooked part of our wellbeing, which is how do we exercise our mind? How do we turn what often feels like a jumble and make sense of it?

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So, if you're interested, just head on over to rachelhart.com/january. You can find out all the details there. I'm so excited to meet you. I'm so excited for you to change your drinking habits and change your relationship with alcohol in the New Year. That's it for today. 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.