

## Ep #215: Absent Urges



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Rachel Hart**

[Take a Break from Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

## Ep #215: Absent Urges

You are listening to the *Take A Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, episode 215.

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.

Welcome back everyone. We are talking about something that I call absent urges. It's something I think that a lot of people don't even realize can exist and don't talk about. But the fact of the matter is that when you take a break from drinking sometimes people will have tons of urges. It will feel like they have so many urges they don't know what to do with all the urges. But sometimes people won't have any. They will take a break from drinking and they will have zero urges to drink. This is a real issue that some people experience.

And I'm going to tell you, even if this isn't the case for you, even if not having any urges sounds like it would be amazing I really want you to listen to this podcast because what I'm going to talk to you about urges today and how urges work is going to be really, really useful for you to start to understand the habit because you know what? When I work with people who are in this situation where they have absent urges, they don't understand where their urges are that they weren't anticipating it can actually feel very disconcerting for them.

This is what I hear a lot, they'll say, "Oh my gosh, I was expecting this to be really hard but it feels so easy. And I don't understand why it feels so easy to say no to a drink because if it's easy then why has it been so hard for me to stop? Why has it been so hard for me to change the habit?" And I think that people are also concerned because both in the podcast and in the work that I do in the Take a Break Challenge I talk about urges a lot. And

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so they start to worry, oh no, if the urges aren't there I'm missing a piece of the puzzle that I need.

And urges are important. I want you to understand more than just how to say no to a drink. I want you to understand how the habit works. And urges are a big part of the habit cycle. So I want you to understand how to handle them and how to use your urges to actually collect data on the habit so that you can learn how to change it. But you're going to start to see that urges are one way in to understanding the habit but they're not the only way. And so if you are someone who takes a break from drinking and doesn't experience a lot of urges that's not a problem.

I would say that this probably happens to about 10 to 15% of the people who go through the 30 day challenge. They expect a ton of urges and then they take a break and they feel nothing. So I'm going to talk today about why this happens, what it may mean and how to keep moving forward in your journey to change your relationship with alcohol even if you wake-up and you don't have any urges to work on.

And of course if you're in the opposite situation, if you feel like you have tons of urges, and you're really struggling with them, you really are going to learn a lot today about how the habit works. So let's backtrack just a little bit. I have a lot of episodes where I talk about urges. Two really good ones are episode 64 which is called Urges 2.0 and episode 174 which is called Urge Work. And in those episodes I really go deep into the ins and outs of urges, and what they are, and why we have the urge to drink, and what they mean, and how to start to handle them in a different way.

But what you really need to understand for today's episode is that first, urges are normal. The urge to drink is normal. It may not feel that way sometimes, especially when you're trying to change the habit. But it's really quite normal. I'll use the word 'urge' and 'craving' and 'desire' interchangeably. But what I'm really talking about are emotions that are encouraging you to take action so that your brain can get a reward.

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So we have urges about all sorts of things. But in the case of alcohol that action, what you are being urged to do is to pour a drink so that your brain can get the temporary pleasure, that temporary reward from drinking. Now, people will notice an urge in different ways. Sometimes people will notice first a thought. So they'll notice, a drink sounds really good, or I want a drink, or I need a drink, or I'd like to drink, or is it time to drink yet. So they'll notice what's happening in their mind.

Other people will notice first what's happening in their body. So they'll notice a feeling of restlessness or salivating. And it really doesn't matter how you come to notice the urge first, what matters is that you just notice yourself wanting a drink, that wanting is the urge. And what I teach is really simple, the more you notice the urge to drink and say no, so the more that you don't obey the urge your brain starts to learn that just because you feel the urge to drink doesn't mean you have to drink.

I know this sounds really simple but this really is the key to everything. Because right now how the habit is working is I feel the urge to drink and I drink, and I feel the urge to drink and I drink, and I feel the urge to drink, and I drink and guess what happens? The more you listen to that urge the more your desire grows. And so learning how to change the habit is learning how to interrupt the cycle, it's learning how to say no. But instead of saying no with willpower, or gritting your teeth, or distractions, or isolating yourself, you learn how to say no with curiosity.

So I talk about collecting urges because they actually are something that you want to collect because each urge has a little piece of knowledge for you. Remember, habits are unconscious which means that you don't have a lot of awareness right now. But every urge that you collect, every urge that appears and you say no to instead of obeying, it really has so much information for you.

And saying no with curiosity, it really is a subtle change. But that changes everything, going from no with willpower and gritting your teeth, and white

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knuckling it, which a lot people do, I did for a very long time. To saying no with, “Hey, what’s happening for me right now? What time of day is it? What day of week is it? Who am I with? What am I doing? Do I have other feelings going on? Am I bored? Am I anxious? Am I annoyed? Am I excited? What’s happening around me? What are the objects around me and people around me?”

What am I surrounded with when it comes to smells, and sights, and sounds? What’s connected to my desire? And also what’s happening in my mind, what excuses am I hearing, what justifications and permissions are running through my mind right now?” All of this data you can collect when you say no to an urge with curiosity. So not only are you starting to exercise your mind and teaching hey, just because we have the urge to do something doesn’t mean we have to do it. Just because we have the urge to drink doesn’t mean we have to drink.

But you’re also, more importantly, because you’re collecting data, starting to create this kind of roadmap for changing the habit. Because I will tell you, and I think that this is one of the areas that is so overlooked when it comes to changing your drinking, your habit, and my habit, and someone else’s habit, they don’t look the same. It’s not this one cookie cutter solution.

You might feel the urge strongest when you’re alone, whereas someone else might feel it strongest when they’re with other people. You might notice that it’s connected to a time of day while other people will notice it is connected to a feeling. Habit change is not a cookie cutter process. That is the lie that we have been sold, that we just need to say no and be firmer with ourselves and have more discipline.

No, actually what you need is to understand how the habit is unfolding specifically in your unique situation. So that’s why I encourage people to learn how to not just say no to an urge but do so with curiosity, with the mind of a scientist, what can I learn here?

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But again there are about 10 to 15% of people that go through my program, that do the Take a Break Challenge and they report that they just don't feel urges so what are they supposed to do? How can they possibly train their brain to say no and collect data, and create this roadmap that I'm talking about if they don't have an urge to work with?

So that's what I want to talk to you about because even if you don't feel any urges there is so much information available to you in the fact that you're not experiencing urges that is going to show you so much about the habit. You really can use not feeling urges to your advantage. Now, when people are inside the 30 Day Challenge and they're getting coached on this, so I'll walk them through several questions. And that's what I'm going to really walk you through right now. These questions are going to help you start to really deduce, okay, so what's going on in my situation?

And the first thing that I always ask people is, "Okay, so what did the habit look like for you? Were you a daily drinker? Were you someone that was pouring a glass of wine every night, maybe once you started cooking dinner, or once you got home, or once you sat down for dinner? Or were you someone that reserved drinking for the weekends? So maybe you would go many days without alcohol and then as soon as Friday night rolled around you would cut loose." The reason that I ask this question is because it starts to give us clues.

Many people who are 'more weekend' drinkers or situational drinkers, maybe it's not the weekend, maybe it's just certain situations that you find yourself in, they won't have urges every day because they didn't train their brain to expect that it was going to be rewarded with alcohol every day.

Maybe they're used to drinking in certain social situations, or maybe they're used to drinking on certain days of the week, maybe Fridays, and Saturdays, and Sundays. So of course on a Tuesday don't be surprised when there isn't the urge to drink, because your brain learned, hey, we don't drink on Tuesdays, that's not what we do. Now, I don't want you to

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think that the lower brain is all about tracking what day of the week it is. It's not tracking the days of the week. It's tracking your thoughts about the day of the week, or the situation, or whatever it may be in your case.

So just this example, it's not like Tuesdays have somehow become off limits in your brain. And your brain knows, okay, we just never have urges on Tuesdays. What your brain is paying attention to is what am I thinking about the day? So maybe normally it's like it's no, it's a Tuesday, I don't drink on a Tuesday. Tuesdays are not a drinking day but then maybe you're on vacation and what happens? You have an urge to drink and it's a Tuesday because your brain is like, of course I drink on Tuesdays, it's a vacation.

The point really is, what I want you to take away from this is first just ask yourself, what did the habit look like before? If you're not used to drinking every day it would make sense that you wouldn't be having urges every day because that's not how the habit was working. But also pay attention to what it was looking like, what the habit was in terms of the situations where you gave yourself permission to drink or said, "No, I don't have permission to drink." So that's the first thing to just check-in with yourself.

If you are more of a situational drinker or someone who reserves it for the weekends, it's quite common that you're not going to experience an urge every single day because that's not what your brain learned. But I will tell you that a lot of times when I start to ask people this question and unpack how their habit is working I will have a lot of people who will say, "No, no, no, I did drink every day. I did drink every night. And as soon as I started this challenge I had zero urges so what's going on there?"

Because in those situations we're like yeah, my brain learned, it expected that I was getting a reward every night. And now that I started saying no, I'm not having any urges. So I'll always ask them, "Okay, so what is your thought about drinking during your break?"



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And it's funny because when I ask them this question so often because we're doing this on Zoom so I can actually see people. They will look at me like I'm asking them some sort of trick question like, "What are you talking about, what is my thought about drinking during the break? I signed up for this 30 Day Challenge so of course I'm not drinking."

But really it's not a trick question because here's the deal, just because you decide that you're going to take a break from drinking, just because maybe you decide to sign up for this 30 Day Challenge or some other challenge that someone else does, it doesn't mean that you're going to have the same thought as everyone else. Some people are going to sign up for a break or decide to start a break and they're going to say, "Okay, here goes nothing, let's see if I can do this. I hope it works. I hope I don't drink. I hope I can make it through the week."

Now, remember what I teach you here, your thoughts create your feelings. All of these thoughts, I hope it works, I hope I don't drink; I hope I can make it through the week. They're going to leave you feeling unsure. You're not going to be feeling super confident. And guess what will happen? Your brain will have a lot of wiggle room to possibly say yes to a drink.

Now, again these thoughts aren't wrong, it's just data for you to notice what you tell yourself, because a lot of times when I work with people and they say, "Yes, I am a daily drinker so my brain is used to expecting this reward every day. And I've started the break and I'm not feeling any urges."

When I ask them this question what I will hear from them is they will say, "Oh, there's no way in hell that I'm drinking over the next 30 days, I'm just all in, I'm doing this." They have completely different thoughts. Their thoughts are creating determination. In fact it's almost even a level kind of above determination. It's like they've taken the option completely off the table. And I think this is really powerful because we don't realize that our thoughts can do this. We don't realize how powerful our mind is when it comes to the urges that we experience.



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But if you're feeling very unsure, if you have a lot of thoughts that sound like I hope it works, I don't know, let's see what happens, there's going to be a lot more wiggle room for the urge to make itself known and to make itself heard. But when you say, "Listen, there's no way in hell this is happening", the urge has much less space to maneuver.

Now, I just want to be really clear, I'm not saying that a single thought can just stop the habit cycle in its tracks. What I'm saying is the amount of space that you give to the urge will connect to how much you are feeling it. And so when you give yourself, usually completely unknowingly, when you give yourself a lot of space for the urge to maneuver, and to complain, and to make excuses, and justifications, and whine, and just make itself known you're going to be feeling it a lot more.

But if you have a thought that just shuts it down just like no, not happening, it just removes the option, it's almost like the urge becomes off limits. And so a lot of times people won't even notice that there's an urge there. They won't even notice that they're shutting it down because they've created so little room for the urge to maneuver.

I think it's actually kind of helpful to take this situation out of the realm of alcohol and think about it in another area of your life. So maybe for example stealing is off limits for you. So you walk into a store and you never consider stealing, you never think, hey, I bet I could just slip that in my pocket or slip that in my purse and get away with it.

Now, of course you could steal, we could all steal, we all have freewill. But a lot of times our thoughts just say, "No, I just don't do that, that's not something that I would do." So there's very little room for thinking about stealing in your mind. Stealing doesn't get a lot of air time even though you're in a store and you're surrounded by things that you could potentially steal. Because you've already decided I don't do that. So you're not spending a lot of time thinking about it because you've already removed that option.

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And this will just happen sometimes totally unconsciously when people decide to take a break, they just decide this isn't happening. I'm not drinking no matter what. And I'm going to tell you this, it sounds very good in theory. I know some of you are listening to me talk about this right now. You're like that just sounds amazing, how do I do that?

But here's what I have noticed is when that happens, of course because it's something that happens unconsciously, when that happens most times these people are the ones that are most likely to skip doing the deeper work. So they make this very firm decision right out of the gate and then they don't drink. And then they get to the end of whatever their break period is, whether it's 30 days, or 60 days, or 90 days, whatever, a year. And then they're just like, "Okay, I did it." And they start drinking and they pick up right where they left off.

And it's almost like the strength of their decision acted like blinders because they didn't have to really look beyond it. They weren't curious. So they don't learn a lot about how the habit is working. I really can't stress enough how important it is to be curious. If you don't feel any urges I want you to ask yourself, "Okay, so what have you told yourself about this break?" Pay attention to the language that you use. Have you made a decision where there's zero wiggle room?

Now, I'm not saying that that's a bad thing. I just don't want you to couple that with a lack of curiosity. I just don't want you to skip over all of the work that's actually going to help you change your relationship with alcohol because you don't just change your relationship with alcohol by saying no. You have to actually understand the thoughts, and the feelings, and the actions and how all of that is connected to the habit.

The next thing to pay attention to is whether or not you are isolating. Now, this may in particular be the case if you find that your habit is very connected to drinking with other people or drinking in social situations. So a lot of times people will decide to take a break from drinking and it'll just sort

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of happen that they have zero commitments on their social calendar, or will just happen that they find that they're busy or they don't say yes to any invites during that break, period.

And maybe it's happening for some people right now just because of Covid and the fact that we're living in a pandemic. But you have to pay attention to this. You have to ask yourself, am I kind of hiding out? Have I decided that it will be easier to get through the break if I don't have to see anyone, if I don't have to put myself in these situations?

Now, listen, I don't think it's a bad choice for some people to say, "You know what? At first I just need to get some time under my belt not drinking. I just need to show myself right now that I can do it." But the fact of the matter is, is you cannot hide out forever. Eventually you're going to have to practice being around people and being in social situations and learning how to say no. And learning how to stick with whatever you decide no matter what feelings come up for you. And so you can ask yourself that. Am I isolating?

You can also be curious, am I distracting myself? This will happen a lot when people will kind of take the advice of, okay, if you're changing a habit and you're trying to say no to alcohol and maybe no to all this extra snacking. Then you just have to do something else with your time. Go for a walk. Take up a new hobby. Start exercising. And it sounds like really great advice but you can distract yourself from the urge at the expense of yourself. Because if you always have a distraction, then what?

It's just like you can't always hide from people. You can't always hide from social situations. You're not always a 100% of the time going to be able to distract yourself from how you're feeling or what you're thinking. So it's really important to just ask yourself, alright, what did my drinking look like before?

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Was I someone who drank every day? Was I someone who drank more in kind of starts and stops? What have I been telling myself about my decision to say no? How much wiggle room have I unconsciously given the thought? Am I isolating? Am I distracting? Because all of this can contribute to why you find yourself in this situation and being like, “I don’t know. I don’t have any urges. I don’t know. I don’t understand how to do this work Rachel, because I’m just not feeling anything.”

Now, this does not mean that there isn’t work for you to do. This doesn’t mean if you don’t experience urges that all of a sudden you’re stuck and there’s no way for you to change the habit. What it means is you have to start getting creative about how you’re going to do this work, because remember, the goal here is not to make every single urge you have go away for the rest of your life. The goal is to teach your brain that urges are no big deal.

So here’s what you can start to do, because if you’re in the situation where you feel like you have absent urges I want to show you how you can start changing the habit. The first thing, just notice the language that you have been using to say no, have you been telling yourself, I can’t drink, I’m not allowed to drink, if I drink I’ll be a disappointment to myself and others? That language is really problematic. Lying to yourself that you don’t have freewill, or telling yourself that you’ll be screwing up if you do drink is basically trying to hold yourself hostage. And it doesn’t work.

Holding yourself hostage is not the name of the game when it comes to changing habits. Obviously you can also in addition to looking at your language, you can stop isolating. You can stop distracting yourself. You can put yourself in challenging situations. So instead of just hiding out at home you can say yes to the invite, yes to seeing people, yes to the situation where you know that there will be drinking.

And also instead of just distracting yourself every night, instead of just filling up your evenings or your weekends, you can actually decide, hey, I’m just

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going to go distraction free. I'm just going to be with myself and see what comes up. So I'm going to set aside my phone, and I'm going to turn off the TV, and I'm going to stop texting, and scrolling, and online browsing. And I'm just going to see what comes up.

And I will tell you, the very first time that I did this work, when I set aside all my distractions, and some of them can just be all the distractions that you have around the house, all of the little projects that you're working on. The first time that I did that I remember feeling like I was going to crawl out of my skin, and it did not take me long to realize that what was actually going on, that I was actually trying to escape my desire to drink, it wasn't about alcohol, it was about not wanting to feel the way that I was feeling, not wanting to acknowledge it.

Now, for me in that situation I really remember it was loneliness that was coming up. I was feeling really lonely at that point in my life. I'm not saying this is the emotion that will come up for you. But if you're always avoiding just being with yourself, if you're always trying to fill your time, you will find that there is something you are trying to avoid. And whether it's a thought or it's a feeling. That is the path. That is the information that you need.

Finally, you can totally collect data on the habit without feeling an urge. I have talked about this on the podcast before, I've talked about visualization and how powerful it is, and how we have just relegated it to NBA athletes and Olympians. But the fact of the matter is that anyone can visualize and it's so powerful. You can just practice conjuring up, hey, what does desire feel like? What does an urge feel like in my body, what do I notice?

I remember having a client do this once and she said, "I noticed that my eyes got wider." It was such a nuanced piece of information. But as soon as she had that, as soon as she realized, hey, my eyes get wider, it gave her a clue. This is what an urge is like for me. Maybe for other people you notice salivating, maybe you notice feeling restless, but you can start to visualize, hey, what comes up for me? Visualize the moments when you

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know you feel the most desire. Visualize the moments when you feel it the least. What thoughts are connected to those urges?

Notice the permission giving thoughts, the excuses, the justifications that you've used in the past. I really want you to think about it this way. Your brain already has all the answers. How the habit works is already in there. You just need to unlock it. You just need to take it from your unconscious brain to your conscious brain? And using the urges that naturally come up is one way to do it, but it's not the only way. You can literally spend time bringing up the habit in your mind's eye, bringing up your desire and your urges in your mind's eye.

And think about okay, what was I doing? Who was I with? What was I thinking? How was I feeling? What were the sights, and smells, and objects around me? And all of that will help you create the roadmap that you need. So listen, whether or not it feels like you have a million urges or you have zero urges, you already have all the information you need to change the habit.

And I hope what you have seen today is there are just different ways to go about finding that information, whether it means that you start to just work with the urges that are there or work with the absence of urges. Both of these paths will show you how to change your relationship with alcohol.

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

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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](https://RachelHart.com/join) and start your transformation today.