

Ep #228: When the Urge to Drink Won't Go Away



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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 228.

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're talking today about what to do when the urge to drink just won't go away. So I hear this happen all the time with the people I work with. They'll say, "You know, all night I had the urge to drink, or I sat through dinner at a restaurant with my friends and the urge never left me. It was there the entire time."

And it's so frustrating when you're in that situation, when you feel like, oh my god, this desire, it just won't go away, it doesn't let up. What am I going to do? And I remember dealing with this myself. Feeling like, oh my gosh, the urge is just going to hang out with me all night long.

And that is not a very fun place to be in. So today, what I want to you about is how to get relief from urges that seem to go on and on and on. It comes up for people who do the 30-day challenge, but you know what, it comes up for everyone.

When anyone is trying to change a habit, and I'm not just talking about the habit of drinking, when you try to change a behavior that seems like it's on autopilot, most people will run into this problem. It will feel like they're having the urge to drink, or to eat, or to procrastinate, or to scroll through their phone, it just keeps coming back.

It can feel like you're playing Whack-a-Mole with your urges all day long or all night long. And the fact of the matter is you don't have to be stuck

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playing Whack-a-Mole. You really can teach yourself how to shorten an urge.

So what I want to do is just back up a little bit and talk about what an urge is. So maybe you call it a craving or your desire or a wanting or a longing or a hankering, it really doesn't matter what you call it. What matters is remembering what an urge is.

And an urge is an emotion. It's a state of mind that you can feel in your body. When I say an urge is an emotion, I'm saying that it's just like feeling happy or sad or angry or bored. You feel all of these emotions in your body. And you also feel desire in your body.

So you can have desire for a glass of wine, or chocolate, or sex. Things that we often associate with pleasure. But you can also feel desire to check your email, or scroll through your phone, or pick at your skin, or chew your nails. Things that we less often associate with pleasure.

Your brain's reward cycle is involved with all of these urges. Whether or not you think the activity is pleasurable or not, all of these urges are part of the reward cycle inside of your brain. Now, remember, your actions don't just happen.

This is really key to everything that I am trying to teach you on the podcast and everything that I drive home. Your actions don't just happen. And whether that's the action of reaching for a drink, or picking up your phone, that action, everything you do or don't do is driven by a thought and a feeling. That's how the think-feel-act cycle works.

Your actions are triggered almost always completely outside of your conscious awareness. So you have a thought, and you have a feeling, but most people don't even notice that the thought and feeling is there, which is why when it comes to habit change, most people put all of their energy and all of their attention on what they're doing, on the action.

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But there's a problem there because your actions don't happen in a vacuum. They're intimately connected with the thoughts running through your mind and the feelings in your body. But if you're like most people, if you're like how I was for a very long time, I was just on autopilot when it came to my mind and my body.

I wasn't paying a lot of attention to what I was thinking or how I was feeling before I reached for a drink, or before I reached for my phone, or before I started picking at my skin. I wasn't paying attention to that at all. I was just focused on the action itself.

And until you start to understand that your actions don't just happen, they don't exist in a vacuum, they are connected to your thoughts and your feelings, it will be really hard to change them. Because it's like you're trying to rewrite your brain but you're only rewriting one piece of the code. You're only focusing on reaching for the drink or reaching for your phone. You're not focusing on the entire program in your brain.

So unless you are actively doing the work of trying to really understand and unwind the habit, it's going to be really hard to change a habit. It's going to be you engaged in a lot of willpower. And you have heard me say this on the podcast before. Willpower is great but eventually it runs out. It feels very exhausting to be engaged with just willpower.

But the good news is that that's not the solution here. You can learn how to say no to your urges, whether that's for a drink, or for a piece of chocolate, or to pick up your phone, you can learn to do that in a way that will actually rewire your brain, will actually change the think-feel-act cycle that is driving the habit. But you have to do that by starting to understand why you said yes.

You have to watch your mind at work before you reach for a glass. You have to notice how you're feeling before you reach for something to drink. That is the work. That is the deep work of learning how to change your

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habits on a sustainable level. On a level that will last and not just through white-knuckling it and trying to grit your teeth.

And the reason most people don't do this is we're just not taught how. I wasn't taught how. Just consider for a second how often you maybe hear other people say this, or maybe these words will sound familiar to you, you've said them yourself.

Someone will say, "Hey, what are you thinking about?" And your response will be, "I don't know. Nothing." Or how do you feel? I don't know, fine, I feel fine. This is the level at which the vast majority of people engage with their thoughts and their feelings. I don't know and fine, or nothing. And that is a problem if you want to change the habit.

Because you have to be willing to start to engage at a deeper level. If you want to really change your drinking, if you want to stop being at the mercy of your urges, especially urges that feel like they're lasting all night long, you have to be willing to go beyond your knee-jerk response of, "I don't know, I'm not thinking about anything, I don't know, I feel fine, nothing's going on."

You have to be willing to look deeper. Because when it comes to habit change, there is always something going on. There is always a thought and always a feeling. Now please hear me. This does not mean that there's some deep dark thought and feeling that has to be addressed. That's really not the case for the vast majority of people.

It just means that there's a thought and a feeling there that most people aren't yet aware of. So the urge to drink is an emotion, but it's a kind of specific type of emotion. So it's not just like happy or sad or angry or bored, it's an emotion that's seeking out a reward.

So the urge is seeking out pleasure. And sometimes people will get a little confused by this and they'll say to me, "You know, I don't even really enjoy

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drinking anymore. This is really just a bad habit.” But what I want you to remember is that you don't need to enjoy something in order to trigger the reward cycle in your brain.

There is a difference between liking and enjoying something, and whether or not your lower brain wants something. Whether or not that reward cycle has been triggered. Liking and wanting are not the same thing. You can want things that you don't actually upon reflection like or enjoy all that much. Because different parts of your brain are involved in wanting and liking.

So that reward cycle in your lower brain that prioritizes dopamine, it prioritizes that kind of quick easy reward, things that give you a fast hit, things like alcohol and sugar and sex and likes on Facebook, this area of your brain is separate from the part that governs your preferences and whether or not you actually like and enjoy something.

And this is where a lot of people get confused because we talk about our wants and our likes as if they're interchangeable, when in reality, they aren't. And this is really good news because when you can start to see that just because you want something doesn't mean you like it, that really helps you start to pull apart how the habit is working.

So urges are emotions, which means they're a state of mind that you can feel in your body. They're connected to your thoughts. They can happen very fast. And they're not necessarily something that you like and enjoy upon reflection.

So all of that is true. Now, I do want to just mention that all emotions happen very quickly, including urges. So the actual physiological process that's happening inside of you, when you feel an emotion, that chemical reaction that's happening in your brain that produces a flood of neurotransmitters or releases hormones that actually tells your body, hey,

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we're feeling something, pay attention, this physiological process, it happens very quickly.

Some people estimate that it happens as quickly as 90 seconds. So really, it's happening in a flash. It's important to remember this when you're in this place of feeling like, oh my god, this urge just won't go away, it's lasting forever. And you may have had this experience also with emotions that aren't urges.

So you may have said like, "I don't know, I've been bored for hours, or I've been angry for a week, or I've spent all night thinking about drinking and having the urge to drink." It's important to really separate out how quickly that physiological process is happening inside of you and then what your experience of it is. Because that starts to give you clues about how it is that you are actually prolonging the urge or prolonging the emotional experience.

Now, I really boil this down to one of three reasons why this can happen, why it is that it can feel like oh my god, this urge is really going on forever. So first, you're doing something which I call elongating the urge. Second, you might be doing something called resisting the urge, or third, you're doing something that I call entertaining the urge.

And I'm going to talk in detail about all three of these things, but I do just want to remind you that this will be happening outside of your conscious awareness. So at first, you will not realize that you are doing this. You will not realize that you are the one prolonging the urge and making it feel like it's going on and on and on.

And again, that is really good news. It's really good news right now that this is outside of your conscious awareness because what it means is that once you start to recognize what is happening, once you start to identify the pattern, once you can bring awareness to what is going on, you can actually intervene in a way that truly works.

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You can intervene in a way that will actually change how you respond to an urge. And you can stop feeling like you're playing Whack-a-Mole. You can stop feeling like you're just swatting at urges all night long.

Okay, so let's talk about elongating the urge. So when I'm talking about elongating, I'm literally talking about making it longer. So what happens, you have that kind of unconscious thought, "A drink would be really good right now." When you elongate that urge, what you end up doing is you start thinking more thoughts that emphasize your desire.

More thoughts about how much you want the drink. And it's almost kind of like a train, and each thought, it's like you're adding a car to the train. So you might have the thought at first, "A drink would be so good right now." Then you think, "Looks so good, smells so good, I really want some. Would be so nice. It would be so enjoyable."

You start thinking more and more thoughts emphasizing how much you want it. And every time you think one of these thoughts, remember how the think-feel-act cycle works. It doesn't just happen once. Every time you think a thought, it creates a feeling. So every time you think one of these elongating thoughts, you're creating another drop of desire to contend with.

You're actually elongating the urge. It's like another car has been added onto the train. Now again, most people don't realize that they're doing this because they're not used to paying attention to their thoughts. So it feels as if it's just like, one urge that just won't go away, it's outside of their control, when in reality, it's their thought patterns. It's their thinking that is recreating the urge and recreating more desire over and over again and that's what they're contending with.

So that's what happens when you're elongating the urge. So you're actually emphasizing your desire. The second thing that will happen is that people will find that they're resisting the urge. So the urge to drink will appear and they'll think, "Why am I feeling an urge? I don't want this to be here. Go

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away, I don't want to deal with you right now." They'll start to feel very annoyed that it's there.

Now, what happens a lot of times with this is this is when people start to slip into willpower and white-knuckling it and gritting their teeth. Because what happens is they are telling themselves that the urge is a problem. They're annoyed that it's there, they're frustrated that it's there. And as soon as you drop into resistance, as soon as you start fighting it, you've gone to battle with the urge.

Now, there's a problem with this. Because urges aren't a problem. They're harmless. The urge can't make you do anything. It's not an emergency. It's honestly not a big deal at all. And I will tell you, this can be really hard to wrap your brain around at first. This idea that urges are not a big deal, they're not a problem, they're totally harmless.

Because when you feel like you're stuck in the habit, when you feel like I don't want to be drinking this much, yet here I am waking up the next day thinking why did you drink this much, or I don't want to eat this much, or I don't want to procrastinate this much, whatever habit you feel like you're stuck in, it can seem like listen, the urge is a big deal.

If the urge wasn't there, I wouldn't be drinking, if the urge wasn't there, I wouldn't be eating, if the urge wasn't there, I wouldn't be procrastinating. But it's not the urge that's the problem. The urge is just your desire bubbling up when your brain has been trained to have that desire.

The real problem is not the urge. It's blindly obeying the urge. It's blindly following it. That's the real problem. Because when you do that, what happens, your desire, it grows, and it grows. You're human, which means you are meant to have desire, you were meant to have urges, the reward cycle inside of you is totally normal, it's not a problem.

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The problem is that no one teaches us how to navigate desire and urges and the reward cycle. And for some of us, when we don't have these tools, when we don't know how to navigate the reward cycle, when we don't know what to do, other than just say yes to our urges, what happens is we start obeying urges at the expense of ourselves.

This is the place where I was in. This is the place where most of my clients are in. And the trick here isn't to make the urge go away. The trick is to realize that it's not a big deal, that you're never at the mercy of it. That you don't need to be annoyed, you don't need to fight it off. You don't need to go to war with it because listen, the urge is here to show you something about the habit.

It literally is like a little invitation to learn a little bit more about how the habit of working, to learn a little bit more about hey, how was I feeling in the moment before I had the urge? To learn a little bit more about hey, what was I thinking? What was happening in my mind?

Most people don't treat the urge to drink as an invitation to learn more. And that's what I want you to start to do. Any urge that you are trying not to obey, I want you to see when it comes up that it's an invitation. It's offering you more detail, more insight, more knowledge about how the habit works and that is helpful. You need that information in order to really understand the habit at the deepest level so that you can change it.

Now, the third problem when people really feel like their urges are lasting all night and they won't go away, what I find people do is they are actually entertaining their urge. Now, I used to do this a lot. I hear this come up all the time for people in the 30-day challenge.

People will say, "Yeah, it was just going on all night, or the entire time I was at dinner I just could not get rid of the urge," and we start to really unpack okay, so what was going on? When you say it was going on all night, what did that look like? What did that sound like?

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And what they will tell me again and again is that they were in this place of should I or shouldn't I? Should I have the drink, or shouldn't I have the drink? Well, maybe I should because everyone else is drinking, or it's Friday, or I had a stressful day, but maybe I shouldn't because I'm trying to change, and I've made this investment in myself to do the challenge.

What they end up doing is they stay in this place of really entertaining the urge. And entertaining the should I or shouldn't I conversation. Well, maybe I should because there's an open bottle in the fridge, but maybe I shouldn't because it's Wednesday.

You know you've had these stories happen for yourself as well. The problem is as soon as you start entertaining the urge, listen, it's going to stick around. Because the brain is like, okay, are we going to make a decision here? Am I going to get my reward?

You're entertaining the possibility that the reward may be coming. And the quickest way out is really simply to make a decision and just say, hey, no, we're not doing that right now. Because as long as you don't make a decision, then you're indulging in the should I, should I not, and when you're indulging in that space, the urge is going to stick around. Because you're entertaining it.

So this is what really can happen. When you feel like the urge is going on for a really long time, you feel like it won't go away, you have to be really curious. Am I elongating it? Am I creating additional desire? Am I resisting it? Am I telling myself that it's a problem and it needs to go away, and I'm annoyed that it's there? Or am I entertaining it? Am I basically listening to that back and forth story of should I drink, should I not drink, instead of making a decision?

Okay, so now that you understand these three pieces, the question is what do I do to stop the urge from lasting all night? If you notice that you are creating more desire, so you're thinking a lot of thoughts like, "That looks

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good, that would taste good, that would feel good,” if you notice yourself doing that, instead of just letting your mind go like a runaway train, what I want you to do is practice dropping into your body.

This is going to feel very unfamiliar for people. This is something we work on a lot in the 30-day challenge because people will say, okay, what does that mean? What I'm talking about is instead of hanging out in your head, instead of hanging out with all the sentences that are creating more desire for you, I want you to drop into your body and ask yourself, what am I feeling when I feel this urge?

It's not where you're used to bringing your attention, and in fact, most people will struggle with this at first. They will say, “Well, I don't know. I don't know what I'm feeling.” You have to be curious, you have to ask yourself questions. If you're not sure, take a guess.

What does it feel like in your chest? What does it feel like in your body? What is your temperature like? What is your breathing like? Do you notice a difference in how quickly your heart is beating? Do you notice how you're holding your shoulders? You have to be really curious and dropping into your body is one of the most effective things that you can do to stop this kind of runaway train that's just creating more and more desire.

The second thing you can do, especially if you notice yourself fighting with the urge, if you're annoyed that it's there, ask yourself, hey, why is this a problem? Why am I telling myself that this urge is a big deal? Notice if you're giving the urge way more power than it deserves.

Because an urge can't make you do anything. You have urges all of the time that you don't act on. Maybe you wanted to yell at your boss, but you didn't. Maybe you wanted to flip someone off when you were driving but you didn't. Maybe you were so angry that you wanted to punch something or throw something against the wall, but you didn't.

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There's so many instances in your life where you had an urge, and you chose not to act on it. This is no different. Those urges aren't a problem. The urges aren't a big deal if we know hey, I don't need to obey them. Just because the urge is there doesn't mean I have to act on it.

So start to just be curious. Why am I saying that this is a problem? Why do I want it to go away? Why am I telling myself that it would be easier if the urge wasn't here? Because what really makes an urge easy to deal with is knowing it's not a big deal.

And the third thing that you can do if you notice that you're entertaining the urge, if you notice that you're stuck in the kind of should I, shouldn't I, and you're in all this back and forth, just make a decision. Making a decision immediately stops the back and forth.

Now listen, you can make any decision. You can make the decision to say yes, or you can make the decision to say no. Just make the decision. But also be aware of what happens when you say yes to the urge, especially if there's been a lot of back and forth in your head.

It's a little bit like you're rewarding the toddler for throwing a tantrum. So the brain starts to learn, hey, you know what, if I throw out a lot of excuses, she's more likely to give in. So what you want to really start to do is teach your brain, I'm immune to your excuses. You can make all the excuses in the world, but I'm going to make a decision and then I'm going to hold firm to that decision.

The thing that I really want you to take away from this episode if you feel like you've been in this situation where an urge is lasting all night and it won't go away, or you're out at dinner and you can't shake it, what I want you to remember is that this is a good thing.

It will not feel like it in the moment, but I promise that it is. Because if this is happening for you, it means that you're unconsciously prolonging the urge.

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And when you realize that you are the reason that the urge won't go away because you're creating more desire, or you're resisting it, or you're indulging in all this back and forth, then you realize that you have the power to intervene.

You don't need to change alcohol, you don't need to make it less tempting, you don't need to get out of the house, you don't need to make sure that no one ever drinks in front of you, you don't need more willpower. You just need to focus on the area that most people overlook when it comes to habit change.

You need to bring attention and awareness to hey, what's happening in my mind? What's happening in my body? Because once you have that awareness, then you can start practicing responding differently, and that is the only way to create permanent change.

So if you have ever played Whack-a-Mole with your urges, which lord knows, I struggled with for a very long time, I want you to know that these three tools can really help you put an end to it. 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.

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