

Ep #242: Unproductive Optimism



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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 242.

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.

Hello everyone, welcome back. Before we get started today, I just wanted to make a note because this episode is actually coming out on my mom's birthday, and I just want to give a really big shout-out to her because she's my mom.

My mom is amazing. She's so smart and talented and she has really had to overcome a lot in her life. But I will say, more than anything, like most mother-daughter relationships, we have had our fair share of ups and downs. And the strength of the relationship that we have today, it really is a testament to everything that I teach you on the podcast.

Because what I'm teaching you on the podcast is more than just how to change your drinking. It's really how to manage your mind, how to start showing up differently, and we do that using the think-feel-act cycle.

And the think-feel-act cycle has helped me transform so many things in my life. There was a time when I thought I'm never going to be able to figure out my drinking, I'm never going to be able to figure out why I'm so compulsive with food.

But there was also a time when I would tell myself I'm never going to figure out how to have a relationship with my mom that isn't difficult, that isn't a struggle. And it turns out my brain was totally wrong when it came to all of this. I just needed to learn the tools to start to change my habits and the

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habits of how I was thinking around alcohol and food and also the habits that I had around the thoughts I had about the people closest to me.

Now, I will tell you, when we are working with people inside the 30-day challenge and doing that advanced monthly work inside Take A Break, people will bring to coaching, they will want to talk about their closest relationships all the time because so often, that is a pain point for a lot of people.

And it's not just a pain point around drinking and your closest relationships. It can just be a kind of pain point writ large. It's an area where so many people find it really challenging to change their behavior because of course, the habits that you develop around your family, they started well before you began drinking, before you picked up that first glass.

You started practicing beliefs and having thought patterns start to develop around your siblings and your parents at a very young age. And it can feel like - I know it felt like this for me for a long time. It can feel like whenever you're around your immediate family, you just kind of revert back to being a kid.

And I'll tell you, it is possible to learn how to change how you show up. Not just with alcohol, not just with food, but with everyone in your life. Simply by using that think-feel-act, simply by learning how to manage your mind.

So that said, happy birthday mom, I love you so much. Now, today we're going to be talking about something I call unproductive optimism and how it might be sabotaging your drinking. But you can listen to this episode like almost all of my episodes and see how it may apply to many other areas of your life.

So we all know what it means to be an optimist, right? So think of that half glass of full, glass half empty. But I will tell you this; optimism really extends

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beyond just approaching life with that glass half full mentality. It's really much more than a positive outlook.

Optimists will go into a new situation anticipating what will go right. So they have high expectations. Now, pessimists will do the opposite. They'll go in anticipating what's going to go wrong. Their expectations are much lower.

When an optimist has a setback, they often tell themselves this is temporary, it's within my control to change, I can do better next time. When a pessimist has a setback, their response is very different. It's much more like, oh my God, this is terrible, this isn't temporary, this is permanent, I'm never going to be able to figure out how to change it.

So it's not just that optimists and pessimists kind of approach setbacks differently. They also approach their accomplishments differently. So the person who is an optimist will take a lot of credit for their achievement and they'll think about how this achievement, because they can take credit for it, they'll think about, hey, how can I apply this to other areas of my life?

Where the pessimist will dismiss an achievement. They'll say, "It was a fluke, it doesn't count," and they won't see how what they have accomplished can apply in other places. Of course because they're not even taking credit for it.

And I will tell you, I see this refusal to take credit for where you are making accomplishments, I see it come up all the time with people around their drinking. All the time when I'm working with people inside the 30-day challenge.

What I will find is that when people start out especially, they rarely, rarely want to take credit for the times where they don't drink, or the times when they stop drinking. So people will come to me, and they'll say, "Rachel, I just can't say no to my urges."

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And I'll say to them, "Okay, let's just take a look at that. Let's be curious about that thought, I can't say no to my urges. Can we find an instance where you had an urge to drink, and you said no?" I was coaching someone on this recently and she said, "Okay, well yeah, I actually had an urge this morning for a glass of wine, but I don't drink before noon."

Now here's the thing; when I pointed this out to her, when I pointed out to her she had this thought I can't say no to my urges, but then here she had an example of saying no that she didn't take credit for. She was having an urge and she was saying no. But she couldn't even see it.

Her belief was so strong that what she did is she said, "Yeah, but that doesn't count. Come on, I don't drink before noon." But here's the thing, it does count. She had an urge, and she didn't give in, she wasn't out of control, she said no to it.

It's totally contrary to the belief that she presented to me. I can't say no to my urges. The fact of the matter was when we looked at it together, she does say no sometimes depending on the clock.

Now, to her, it was like, okay, fine, whatever, it was before noon, so I wasn't going to drink, that really doesn't count. She really didn't want to spend any time with me there looking at that. She really thought like, this is just beside the point, who cares, I'm not going to congratulate myself because I didn't pour a glass of wine at 10 in the morning, I'm not going to congratulate myself for not pouring a drink at work.

This is the kind of mentality she was in. Now, the problem with this is as long as you don't take credit for the times that you do say no, the times that you don't give in to your urges, what you end up doing is you feed this belief system that you can't say no when the urge appears, even though you have proof that it's not true.

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And that belief system that you can't say no when you have an urge, that your urges are more powerful than you, that belief system is the real problem. So it's not just around saying no to an urge that you're convinced that doesn't count.

I also see this happen when people talk about how much they drink. So a lot of times, again, people will say, "Rachel, once I start drinking, I just can't stop." Again, I say, "Alright, let's just look at this thought together. Once I start, I can't stop. Let's just be curious. Can we discover times when you did indeed stop?"

And nine times out of 10, we will discover this. In fact, probably more often than that, we will find that there are moments when people make a decision to stop. But then they'll turn to me, and they'll say, "Okay fine, I stopped when I finished the bottle, but I didn't want to drink that much."

So they'll use the fact that they drank more than they want to as proof that their decision to stop, it just doesn't count. But I want to look at more. Let's just really examine whether or not this is true.

Okay, you finished the bottle, you didn't want to finish the bottle. But let's just be curious. Did you have more alcohol in your house? Almost always across the board people will say yeah, of course, I had more in the liquor cabinet.

I've had people say to me, "Yeah, of course, I have a whole wine cellar full of it." So the opportunity to drink more was available, even after finishing a bottle of wine, but then they stopped. Now, notice again, this is an instance where people will say, "Yeah, but it doesn't count because I drank too much."

But part of the work of unpacking the habit is finding the beliefs that aren't serving you and of thoughts like once I start, I can't stop. That is definitely not serving you, especially when it's not even true. It's much more

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productive to say once I started drinking, I drank the entire bottle, and then when the bottle was done, I decided to stop.

It's so much more productive to do that because then you're reminding yourself, hey, I'm still here, I'm still making decisions, I still have a role to play. Alcohol isn't just running the show now.

Now here's the thing, I know a lot of you are listening to me talk about these two scenarios, and you're trying to find evidence right now of how it doesn't apply to your situation. Your brain is like okay, well she doesn't know me, I give in to all my urges, or she really doesn't know me, I'm truly unable to stop once I start.

And what I just want you to notice is how hard your brain is fighting right now, how hard you are fighting right now for being powerless. And my question is, is that even true? Can you find even a single instance where you have said no to the urge, or where you have decided to stop, even though you could have kept going?

Just notice, just be curious if when you find these moments, you say, yeah okay, but that's not what I normally do, that's the exception, not the norm, so it doesn't count. Now, I would tell you this; I would say if it's the exception rather than what you normally do, that means those instances count even more because it shows that you can do something even if your habit is to say yes or to keep going or to obey your urges.

It really is important, especially when we're talking about today's topic of unproductive optimism. It's really important to understand the areas in your life where you are denying your own power, your ability to say no. You have to understand where you're undermining that.

And one more thing that I want to add before we really go into unproductive optimism and how it can be sabotaging your goals right now when it comes to changing your relationship with alcohol, I want to add this; I know I

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opened the podcast by talking about optimists and pessimists, and that's how we are kind of used to framing it.

But you also know if you listen to this podcast that I generally don't believe that labels and labeling yourself is usually very helpful, including the label of optimist or pessimist. Because here's the thing; if you are used to saying that you're a pessimist, I want you to consider that this isn't who you are, and this label may not be helpful. In fact, it may just be a label.

I have to remind myself of this all the time. I'm very quick - I notice my brain doing this, very quickly it wants to say, "My husband is such an optimist and I'm just really the pessimist in the relationship." Now, the problem is when we use labels like these, it sounds as if it's an inborn trait, like I don't know, this is just who I am, I was just born a pessimist, this is how I came out of the womb, so what am I going to do? I can't just change my DNA.

When you could instead be saying, this is how my brain learned to think. I have to remind myself this all the time. I was taught to think pessimistic thoughts. I learned them. And then I practiced these thoughts over and over for decades totally unconsciously. And the more I practiced them, the more my brain gathered evidence to prove these thoughts true.

It became the lens through which I learned to see the world. But it's not who I am. So when I find myself wanting to label myself, really with anything, I have to remind myself, listen, this is just because your brain is really practiced at having these thoughts and thinking them. It's not because of who you are.

And that switch for me, from labeling myself of like, I'm such a pessimist, or I'm a pessimistic person, switching to my brain is thinking pessimistic thoughts right now because that's what I trained it to do, that switch is everything.

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Because you know what, it reminds me I can start to train my brain to think something different. This is true of how you see yourself, this is true of how you view alcohol. This is true of the habit of drinking.

Now, with all of that said, it sounds like the goal is to be an optimist, right? There is all this research out there, you start Googling and you can find all this research about people who have an optimistic life view, they tend to outperform pessimists, and they're healthier, and they live longer, and we're sold this idea that we should all strive to be optimists.

And what I want to offer you today is something else. What I want to offer you is it's not always better to have more positive sounding thoughts, especially when you're trying to change a habit. It is not always better to have more positive sounding thoughts than negative sounding thoughts.

In fact, the flavor of your thoughts, it really doesn't matter at all. What matters is what result they are creating for you. This is where most people don't really understand because we tend to look at our thoughts in this very kind of superficial way.

Is it positive or is it negative? And what I want you to do is to really dig deeper. Because just because you have a thought that sounds positive doesn't mean it's creating a positive result for you. You really have to examine the feeling that that thought creates and the action that you take in response.

Then you start to understand, hey, is this a result that is helping me? And if you want to start really getting to the root of your drinking, you have to be willing to dig deeper into your thoughts, and not just kind of label them as I don't know, this one sounds good, this one sounds positive, and this one sounds negative.

You have to really do that deeper level work. There is such a thing as unproductive optimism. And by this, I mean thoughts that sound good, they

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might look good on paper, they may even feel good, but they're definitely not helping you change your drinking.

This came up recently when I was working with someone inside of Take A Break. She was saying, "I always hear people talking about how they're so negative and they really beat themselves up and they blame themselves and they shame themselves when they drink too much," but she was saying, "It's really not my problem. The problem I think that I have is I'm too nice to myself."

So I started to ask her, okay, what does that mean? And she said, "When I have an urge, my response is oh well, tomorrow's a new day." And it's a thought on its own that can sound really supportive and nice. Yeah, tomorrow's a new day.

The problem was as we looked at it together, it was giving her permission to give in to her urges. It was giving her permission to say yes to the drink, yes to the food. Because you know, why not? Tomorrow's a new day. And it's interesting really to see like, you can't take a thought like that just at face value. You can't just be like, yeah, sounds pretty good, feels pretty good.

You have to actually work it all the way through the think-feel-act cycle and really see and ask yourself, is the result productive for my overall goal? If my overall goal is to change my relationship with alcohol and to not just be reactive to my urges and say yes when they appear, are these thoughts going to help me when I think things like, yeah, tomorrow's a new day, I'm going to be better tomorrow, I'm going to get back on track on Monday, when it's a new month or a new year, I'm totally going to buckle down.

These thoughts may sound great, they may even feel good in the moment because guess what, they're giving you permission to drink. They're giving you permission to eat. These thoughts give you permission so that you

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don't have to be present with the discomfort of creating a new habit, the habit of saying no.

These thoughts are telling you, yeah, go ahead, say yes. And if you want to change your relationship with alcohol, it means you have to feel that urge come up, you have to feel that desire bubble up inside of you and then you have to practice not answering it. And it's going to create a little discomfort.

Nothing terrible, but you're going to feel a little restless. You're going to feel a little like, but I want it. It will be totally manageable but that discomfort, that restlessness, it will still be there, especially at first. But if you believe oh well, tomorrow's a new day, guess what happens? You just get to drink right over it. You don't have to be present with that restlessness.

Now, the deeper problem with a thought like this, this kind of unproductive optimism is that yeah, tomorrow is a new day, but you're not going to be a new person unless you practice showing up differently right now, in the present moment.

This thought, this kind of unproductive optimism, it doesn't actually help you do anything to figure out how to make tomorrow a new day. Because if you want to show up differently tomorrow or next month or next year, it's not going to magically happen. You have to take steps to make that a reality and hoping that tomorrow you'll just magically respond differently to your urges, or that there won't be any, or that your desire will just have gone away, that's not happening unless you do something differently in the moment, unless you show up differently right now.

Tomorrow can't be different until you show up differently today. You have to teach your brain a new way forward so that you can take advantage of the fact that yeah, tomorrow you do have a new 24 hours to practice being differently and showing up differently and responding differently.

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But a thought like, “Oh well, tomorrow’s a new day,” that’s an example of unproductive optimism. You can’t just look at the content or the flavor of a thought and say it sounds good so it’s good. You have to examine where it leads you. What path is it pushing you down? What actions are you taking in response to it?

If a thought leads to saying yes to an urge, if it leads to drinking, if it leads to eating, if it leads to just more, more, more, it’s not helping. It’s not helping if your goal is to not be at the mercy of your urges anymore. It’s not helping if your goal is to change your relationship with the things that you desire.

Even though that thought sounds good, it’s unproductive because it’s not getting you closer to your goal. It’s not helping you learn to show up differently. It’s not helping you get to your real result, the result where you can take it or leave it, alcohol is not a big deal, it’s not occupying so much space in your brain.

If a thought leads to saying yes, even though it sounds good, even though it feels good, even though you’re like, yeah, it’s very positive, it’s unproductive. That is unproductive optimism. This idea that you will magically transform into someone new tomorrow without doing the work today.

You really do have to be onto yourself. You have to be onto whatever your particular version of self-sabotage is. Some of you are going to sabotage yourself with thoughts that immediately sound very negative.

When you’re thinking to yourself, “Oh my God, what is wrong with me? I’m never going to learn my lesson, I don’t know, I’m just missing an off switch in my brain, or I just must be a compulsive person,” or thoughts like, “Who cares? Screw it.”

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All of those thoughts, they're obviously very negative. And you can see that they sabotage your ability to start to change the habit. Now, others of you are going to sabotage yourself with much prettier thoughts. "Tomorrow's a new day, I'm really going to buckle down when Monday comes, I deserve it, red wine is really healthy for me."

Some of you are going to find that you're using prettier, nicer, more positive thoughts, but actually when you follow them through, when you look at the think-feel-act cycle, they're not helpful either. And most of you are going to find that you go back and forth between these kind of different variations of self-sabotage.

Sometimes it's really negative, sometimes it's kind of positive. The point for you is not to try to make all your thoughts sound beautiful and hopeful and positive and to never have a negative thought. The point is to focus on where that thought directs you.

You cannot just assume, well, it sounds kind of nice and it feels kind of good, so it must be a good thought. No, you have to really see, is it leading me to doing more of the thing that I don't want to do?

And that's what happens once you start really using the think-feel-act cycle. And I'm talking about using it, which is doing more than just listening to me talk about it on a podcast, but actually practice getting this down on paper. That's so much of what people do inside the 30-day challenge.

It's one thing to listen to me talk, it's another thing to go to the gym and to start to write this out. And it sounds very simple at first, and then you start trying to put this on paper and that's really where the rubber hits the road. That's really where you're like, wait, how does this work, what's going on?

Because that is when your brain is starting to really start to lay down new neural pathways and think differently, and observe your thinking in a new way, and start to manage your mind in a way that it hasn't done before.

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So I want you to think about this. First, you're not an optimist or a pessimist. You're a human who unconsciously learned to think a certain way and you're very good at practicing that over and over again.

I want you to remember also that our goal here is not to just have beautiful, supportive, lovely, kind thoughts all the time. No, our goal is to take every thought we have when it comes to drinking, when it comes to our habits, hold it up to the light, really inspect it, and see, is this helping me?

I don't care if it sounds good, I don't care if it sounds negative. I just care what the result that you're getting. Thinking lovely, supportive, optimistic sounding thoughts, it may actually very well produce the opposite of what your goal is.

This is how you start to manage your mind. It's not about having a positive attitude. Who cares if you have a positive attitude of it's leading to more drinking? If you have a positive attitude that you're going to start tomorrow, that may actually be very detrimental.

The goal here is just to look critically at the thoughts you have that are leading to drinking, the thoughts you have around your urges, and understand, how do I then show up? Do I say yes? Do I give in? Do I practice saying no? Do I practice being with my restlessness? What happens next?

So don't just focus on what thoughts sound like. You have to really start understanding what thoughts produce for you, what they create. That's how you change your drinking at the deepest level. 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-

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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.