

Ep #245: Practicing Habit Change



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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 245.

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 my friends. We are going to talk about practicing habit change. This is one of the most important topics that you can focus on when you are learning how to change your relationship with alcohol.

We're going to be talking today about doing, doing the work, showing up for this work, rather than quitting on yourself. Because here's the thing; if it feels like you're on autopilot when you drink, if it feels like your brain is just like, I don't know, more is better, let's have another, if it also feels like your drinking just happens, then you have to teach your brain how to respond differently to your urges.

We cannot wave a magic wand and just make it so that your urges go away. You have to learn a new way to respond to them. Now remember, one of the things that I teach you and I talk to you about all the time is how the urge to drink is harmless.

Now, that's not where a lot of people start. A lot of people start from like, no, the urge to drink is not harmless, it's the problem, and I need to make these urges go away. But here's the thing; it truly is harmless. It cannot make you do anything. But when you keep responding to that urge by saying yes, here's the thing, you're not treating the urge as if it's harmless. You're treating the urge like it's a big deal.

And I really want you to think about this, especially in your situation. Are you acting as if your urges are no big deal, no problem, or are you

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responding to them in a way that indicates, oh yeah, I think this urge, it has power, it has power over me, it's a problem?

Now intellectually, it's very easy to listen to what I'm saying and say, "Yeah, okay, I know, the urge to drink is never a problem, I never need to drink." But in the moment, this is what I want you to consider. In the moment, are you showing up that way? Are you showing up as if it's not a problem?

And the way to really ask yourself is to consider, okay, what's my reasoning for why I am saying yes to the urge to drink or yes to the urge to drink more? So maybe it's because you're like, well, I don't know, saying no just feels uncomfortable, or when I say no I feel deprived, or it's just annoying to have this desire, I want it to go away, or I just hate restricting myself, I hate feeling like I can't have something, or I feel like when I say no that I'm missing out, I'm not enjoying myself as much.

Or maybe I just don't want to want something and not have it. What's the reasoning for why you say yes to your urges? Now, when you start to look at these reasons, what you can start to see is that these reasons are telling your brain that the urge is a problem.

Your brain is learning, "Oh, the urge to drink, it needs a solution, and that solution is to drink." Now you know all of this work that I teach you here you can apply to food as well. Many of you are dealing with both. I dealt with both for a long time, feeling like I really didn't have control, not just over my drinking but over my eating as well.

So think about that. You're teaching your brain you need to say yes, otherwise you're going to be unhappy, otherwise it's not going to feel good. When of course, the opposite is true. In reality, the more that you say yes to your urges, the unhappier you become. But that's not what we're telling ourselves in the moment.

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The more we say yes to our urges, the more the problem grows. Not just because now you're consuming more, you're drinking more, you're eating more. Now you have all the additional calories and maybe the disturbed sleep and maybe the wasted evenings.

But it becomes a problem because the more you say yes to your desire, the more you say yes to those urges, the more you want to drink. Your desire grows. You find yourself reaching for another glass. You find that you have more desire. Now all of a sudden it went from I was having a glass of wine, to I'm polishing off the bottle.

And this can feel like an impossible cycle to break. It felt like that for me for the longest time. I really did believe, truly, deeply, I believed that I was missing an off switch in my brain and that I don't know, I was just one of those people that when I started drinking, I wanted to keep drinking. When I started eating, I wanted to keep eating.

It felt like something was broken inside of me. Like the wiring in my brain got messed up. What I didn't realize at the time was that what I thought was a compulsive behavior that just, I don't know, I was born with, it was something that I had unconsciously taught my brain.

It was the result of a think-feel-act cycle that I had unconsciously practiced over and over again, because listen, the drink just sits there, the food just sits there. It doesn't make its way to your mouth without your mind having a thought.

But that's what I was totally blind to. I was totally blind to thoughts like, "I deserve it, I've been so good, I've had a shitty day, I need a break, one won't hurt, just one more taste, one more sip, one more glass, I might as well finish the bottle, there's barely any left, who cares, right?"

I was so blind to all of that. Now, when I talk about this, a lot of times people will say, "Okay, but once I start drinking Rachel, it's really difficult to

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stop because alcohol impairs your judgment.” And here’s the thing; I really want you to question that.

I really want you to question the belief that alcohol impairs your judgment. And if you’re hearing me say this and you’re like, what is she talking about this? Just hang with me for a second.

Let’s take a glass of wine. So a standard serving is five ounces. When you take a sip, so that’s what, I don’t know, maybe it’s quarter of an ounce. Maybe a little bit less. Does a quarter of an ounce of wine impair your judgment?

That’s probably the equivalent to the amount of alcohol that’s found in an entire bottle of kombucha. Are you finishing off a bottle of kombucha and going like, well, my judgment is impaired, so now I’m just going to drink and eat whatever’s in front of me? No, you’re not.

But I do really want you to think about this. Because people will make this argument to me all the time. They’ll say, “Well, once I start drinking, alcohol impairs your judgment, and then I can’t help myself, I can’t make the decision to stop.”

And I want you to know, I was there too. This is something I believed too. We don’t question this, we don’t question this thought because it’s just readily accepted like, yeah, you know, alcohol impairs your judgment, so what are you going to do?

But what we’re failing to do, what most people never do is to really slow down the process and ask themselves, okay, when? When does this happen? When do I stop running the show? Is it after one sip? Is it after two sips? Really, when does it happen for you? Is it sip number three, sip number four?

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I mean, there's easily 20 sips in a five ounce serving. Are you just on autopilot and not paying attention to the fact that you're making a decision every time you pick up a glass? Are you just using this belief that once I start, I can't stop as an excuse?

But I do want you to question this idea. Question the idea that you stop making decisions. What I find so often is that most people just apply this idea and they so long have practiced this belief of I don't know, I'm just kind of compulsive and once I start it's really hard to stop, they've applied this belief for so long and they're so unconscious to their decision making even though it's there, that they're just unaware of the thoughts. They're unaware of the feelings that are working in the background.

And it feels like your drinking just happens, when in fact, it doesn't. You have a thought that leads you to take another sip. But then what I was doing, I was so blind to all of that and the next day I was just like, I don't know, I'm just someone who can't stop once I start.

I had this belief for the longest time. And really, if you believe that even a sip of alcohol, even a quarter of one ounce impairs your decision making so much that you're no longer in control, then why on earth are you drinking in the first place?

Really sit with that. I want you to consider how powerful a thought is like once I start, I can't stop. Is that really the God's honest truth? Do you have any examples where this hasn't been the truth for you? Or is it that you don't want to stop? You don't want to stop because you don't know how to deal with the discomfort of an unanswered urge.

That was what was true for me. I didn't want to stop because I didn't know how to deal with feeling annoyed or restless or like I was missing out, or how to just deal with that urge once it appeared. I think this is just such an important thing for all of you out there, you want to change the habit, you want to change your relationship with alcohol, but you have to start

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questioning, okay, so is it true that I just stop making decisions once I have my first sip? Or does this belief that once I start, I can't stop, or that alcohol impairs my judgment, is it just giving you permission to not have to be responsible for how much you drink?

The reason I'm really hammering this home is because your brain is always going to be your greatest asset. It is going to be the greatest tool that you have at your disposal. The human brain is how you actually are able to change your habits on purpose and change your behavior on purpose.

Even if right now it feels like, "I don't know Rachel, you don't know my brain," even if right now it feels compulsive, it feels like you're missing an off switch, your brain is a tool, it is the tool that is going to help you change. If you are willing to practice responding to an urge differently, but you can't do that if you're also carrying the belief, "Once I start, I can't stop, alcohol just impairs my judgment."

This is where practice comes in. This is where doing the work and learning and showing up differently comes in. But you have to be willing to continually practice. And now, listen to me. I'm not just talking about practicing saying no. I'm talking about practicing dealing with whatever comes up for you, whatever emotions you have when you say no to that drink, whether it is no entirely to the drink or no after the first sip.

What comes up? You have to practice responding differently if you're feeling annoyed or deprived or believing and telling yourself, "Things would be more fun, I'd be having a better time, this would be more enjoyable, I'd be able to relax if only I had this drink."

Now, you can learn a new way to respond to all of this. You truly can. But you cannot just snap your fingers or wave a wand and magically get there. You have to keep showing up. You have to keep trying.

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Habits don't change because you did something differently once or twice. They change because you did something differently over and over and over and over again. They change because you practice repeating a new behavior 50,100, 500 times, whatever it takes.

And listen, if this feels daunting for you, it's only because of how you are used to practicing new behaviors. And I will promise you that it's probably not just around drinking. It's probably how you practice any kind of new behavior in your life.

So most people start out, and if you're anything like me, you start out by having a set of totally unrealistic expectations for how that new behavior should unfold. So I would start out with the belief of like, okay, I should just be able to do this, this makes perfect sense, I should be able to do this and not screw up again. I shouldn't make mistakes.

Now, of course, we know when we hear other people say this, this is totally unrealistic, but then we turn around and we apply this standard to ourselves. I talk about learning how to change the habit a lot, I talk about like learning any new skill. If you can't get on a bicycle for the first time and just ride off into the sunset and never wobble and never fall down, then why on earth would you immediately be able to change how you respond to your urges?

That really is problem number one I find that gets in the way of practice is being totally unrealistic about how change should unfold. Telling yourself that you should just know better, you should be able to do this and not screw up, you shouldn't make any mistakes.

And problem number two I find that gets in the way of practicing responding differently to your urges is what happens when things don't go according to plan. What do you do when you promised yourself that you wouldn't drink and then you went back on that promise? How do you show up with

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yourself when you said I'm just having one tonight, and then next thing you know, you've had the bottle?

Again, if you're anything how I used to be, you make these moments mean the worst about you and the worst about your future. So I would tell myself, "Oh my God, I'm just - something is wrong with me, I'm never going to figure this out, all of the hard work, everything that I've been doing up until this point, it's all for naught. Now I have to go back to square one."

That was the cycle that I was in. That's actually the habit, the underlying habit that I was practicing was making any time that things didn't go according to my plan mean something terrible about me and mean something terrible about my ability to change and my ability to succeed.

And this is really why I don't like the practice of counting sober days. Because what happens for most people is they get to some number of days, they get some number of days under their belt not drinking, and then they slip up. And they go straight to thoughts like, "Okay, well, that didn't work." They go straight to feeling defeated and then they throw in the towel.

That is how you start down the road of self-sabotage. The belief that failure is a sign that you're never going to figure this out. It feels awful. And what do most people do? They use their failure, instead of a stepping stone to understand the habit deeper, they use it as like, okay, well, I mean, might as well have a drink.

We use it as an excuse to go back to the old habit that we're trying to change. This is what I used to do. Every time I would try to change my drinking and it didn't work, I would make it mean that all was lost. Instead of learning from like, hey, why didn't it work? I thought I already had the answer. I thought like, well, I don't know, because I'm just compulsive and something's wrong with my brain and once I start, I can't stop.

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None of that was true. It wasn't true for me and it's not true for you. The problem is when you believe all of that, you feel totally hopeless. And feeling hopeless does not create change. When you're hopeless, that's when you have thoughts like, "I don't know, I might as well get drunk, I might as well eat whatever I want, I might as well light up that cigarette."

Hopelessness sends you back to the behaviors that aren't serving you, and that's my problem with counting days. Because days don't really matter. What matters is practice. What matters is how long are you willing to practice? How many mistakes are you willing to make and still keep going, still keep trying, still keep showing up? Rather than sliding into feeling defeated and hopeless and self-sabotage.

Now, the answer needs to be I'm all-in for as long as it takes. Because honestly, what's the alternative? What is the alternative to I'm all-in no matter how long it takes? You're just going to be stuck with this mindset of more is better that isn't serving you and isn't working for you and creating a lot of negative results in your life? I don't think so.

But most people, when they start out, they don't have their belief yet as I'm all-in no matter what it takes, I will keep practicing because they say, "I just can't afford to keep screwing up, Rachel, it feels awful." Their reasoning sounds a lot like I've tried to change so many times before, I've made so many mistakes already, I just can't afford to do this.

This is everything I told myself as well. But here's the thing; this is where I was wrong, and this is where you are wrong if you're also telling yourself this. What you can't afford to do is keep quitting on yourself. All of my attempts to change - and listen, there were a lot. From the time that I was 17 for a decade plus, there were a lot of attempts.

Setting drink limits, and spacing drinks with water, and only drinking on certain days, and only drinking with certain people, and only drinking certain types of drinks, and making sure that I was drinking on a full

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stomach and trying to pace myself with a friend who drank more slowly and swearing off alcohol for a week or a month, or saying, “I’m never going to do that again.”

I thought that I was trying so many things to change my drinking. And the truth of it, these attempts, they did kind of look differently at the surface level. But what I was actually doing was repeating the exact same thing, the exact same way to try to change a habit over and over again.

What I was doing, all of these attempts were setting a rule and then gritting my teeth and using willpower to fight my desire and fight my urges. And when that didn’t work, I made it mean that something was wrong with me, and I was never going to figure it out and I would feel terrible. And slide right back into the habit.

The truth was all of those attempts, even though I felt like I had tried so many things, I hadn’t tried a million things to change the habit. I had tried the exact same thing over and over and over for more than a decade. I had been using the exact same formula over and over again.

Willpower to resist my desire, my desire never actually changing, and then shame when it didn’t work. Willpower and shame, willpower, and shame. No wonder I wasn’t learning anything new. No wonder my desire wasn’t change. No wonder I kept feeling like my urges were a problem.

You have to be willing to show up differently. You have to be willing to drop willpower as the engine of change because it is not the engine of change. It’s how you stay stuck. You have to start learning how to respond differently to the discomfort of saying no because listen, it will be a little uncomfortable at first, even though the urge is harmless.

Because your brain has learned like, no, I don’t want to feel this way. If I’m feeling uptight, if I’m feeling stressed out, if I’m feeling disconnected, the way to solve this is to have a drink. You have to start learning how to create

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whatever it is you're actually desiring. That's what the think-feel-act cycle is about and why it's so effective.

It's not just about showing you how the habit is unfolding and why you keep saying yes to a drink. It is the path to learning how do I get what I actually am deeply desiring in this moment. Whether that is fun, or connection, or feeling relaxed, or feeling more confident, or just not feeling deprived, not feeling like I'm missing out.

That's what the think-feel-act cycle can start to show you. You have to learn that you can create what you're desiring instead of looking for a drink to be the temporary fix because that's all it's ever going to be. It's a temporary fix. And then tomorrow and the next day and next week, whatever you believe pouring a drink was solving, it's going to be there again.

The boredom, the stress, the anxiety, the deprivation, it's going to be there. And the problem is now it will be a little bit less tolerable for you to deal with on your own because you have taught your brain, no, we don't have to feel this, we just have to have a drink.

Except that solution, pouring that drink that seems like a quick and easy fix, what happens? It leads to you wanting more and desiring more and drinking more. And this is really what I want you to consider today. Are you willing to question all of your beliefs about why it is you drink the amount that you do?

Are you willing to learn from your failure instead of using it as an excuse to stay stuck in the habit? Are you willing to be all-in with practicing or are you telling yourself, no, I've tried enough, and it just doesn't work?

Because habit change is never going to be about waving a wand and making your urges disappear. It's about the willingness to keep showing up, to keep practicing, to be all-in on learning a new way to respond to your

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urges and a new way to respond to that discomfort, and a new way to create your desires. Because that's what it takes to change your relationship with alcohol.

And the good news is you have exactly what you need in order to do this. You have the ability to watch your brain at work. And watch the habit unfold and intervene. That's what your brain gives to you. It's not broken, you're not missing anything, there's nothing wrong with you. You just need to learn how to practice in a new way. 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.