Ep #247: Urge Worry

Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Rachel Hart

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You are listening to the *Take A Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, episode 247.

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.

Alright, welcome, everyone. So, I want to talk to you today about something called urge worry. So, that is when you start to get nervous about your urges and you start to worry about what the presence of an urge to drink means.

Now, I talk about urges all the time on the podcast. There are lots and lots of episodes that you can dive into. The work of learning how to change your response to the urge or craving or wanting or longing to drink, this is a big part of what I teach in the 30-day challenge.

So, people don't realize that they can actually do this. They can change their reaction to their desire. And that actually puts them in a place of power. And I think one of the reasons why we don't do this is because – or we don't even realize that we can do this – is because we get so nervous about the presence of urges, especially when you decide, "Hey, I want to change this habit. I don't like how much I'm drinking or I don't like how often I'm drinking or I don't like how I behave when I'm drinking. I want to drink less or I want to take a break or I want to stop."

So, we set a goal, and then all of a sudden, it's like, "Oh god, but it's Friday night, or I'm out with friends, or I just finished a big project at work, or I want to celebrate." And that desire appears. And we get really nervous about it, like, "Oh god, the urge, I hate it. I just want it to go away."

Ep #247: Urge Worry

And what I will hear a lot is I'll watch people make urges mean all these really negative things. So, they'll start doing the work in the 30-day challenge and they'll say, "God, I'm having too many urges. There's just too many. I think maybe I have a big problem."

Or they'll say, "I don't know, I just have these urges and they're unbearable and I hate them and they never go away and I just think that something is wrong with my brain." Or sometimes, what I will watch people do is they'll say, "I'm having all these urges. And I think maybe it means that I don't actually want to stop drinking."

And I think the problem here is that we are not taught that urges, all urges, are a very normal part of every habit. So, it's not just around the habit of drinking. The desire for a reward is very normal. Nothing has gone wrong. But no one teaches us about it.

So, when you have a habit around drinking. You taught your brain that it could expect a reward in certain situations at certain times of day, certain days of the week, certain tasks that you are doing, maybe while you're cooking dinner, when you're watching TV.

You taught your brain to expect a reward when you're experiencing certain feelings or doing certain things or you're with certain people. That's how the habit works. Your bran is scanning the environment saying, "Hey, when's the next time I'm going to get this reward? When's the next time that I can motivate this human to go get it?"

So, one of the things that I want to do on today's episode is really just dive into how the brain works, because I think when you start to understand that better – and I don't know why it's not taught in school. I wish that I had learned this when I was a kid, but I didn't. But I think when you start to understand this, not only does it help to just kind of normalize the fact that you're experiencing urges, it helps you start to see that they're really not that big of a deal.

And it also helps you realize, listen, you have this incredibly powerful brain. It's this incredibly powerful tool that you can actually use to change the habit, you can actually use to change how you show up in life. But no one gives us the instruction manual. No one explains what's happening behind the scenes.

It's just kind of like, "Oh, great, you've got a huma brain. Good luck figuring that out." So, understanding why you have urges and how the brain is involved, I think, it's not just kind of interesting information to have. It really helps you start to feel like you are running your brain as opposed to the other way around, like your brain and your desire and your urges are running you.

So, that's what we're going to talk about today. And I hope that you will walk away from this episode seeing whatever you're making the urge mean right now, I guarantee that's not what it means. So, if you're making it mean it's terrible, it's awful, it's unbearable, if you're making it mean that there's something wrong with your brain, if you're making it mean, "I think this means I should just keep drinking, that maybe actually I don't want to stop," I hope that you will see today that all of those interpretations has actually nothing to do with what's happening behind the scenes.

Okay, so let's just back up and understand for a second that your brain, the human brain evolved to pay attention to two things in the environment. It's paying attention to threats, to your immediate safety, and rewards that will help you stay alive.

So, focusing on avoiding danger and finding rewards, this is a very intrinsic and old operating system inside every human brain. And I think understanding this piece is really important to understanding how the habit of drinking – and really every habit – operates.

So, this system, it's inside every single brain. You're scanning for danger. You're looking for rewards. It's a very primitive operating system. Now,

what you have to remember is that primitive operating system is alive and well, even though it was designed millions of years ago.

So, let's just think for a second about what your brain perceives as danger. For most of human history, danger was what was going to kill you. So, the terrain around you could kill you. You could trip and fall. You could break a bone. There's no hospital for you to go to. There's no antibiotics to take. If the wound gets infected. The terrain could be very deadly.

Exposure to the elements could kill you. You didn't have a weatherman or a forecast telling you what to expect. You didn't have a house to retreat to when tings got bad. You didn't have a thermostat on the wall that you could change to warm up or cool down your environment. Exposure to the elements was very deadly.

Predators could kill you. So, it wasn't just that humans were competing with lions and tigers and bears for the same food, the same resources. We were also food for those predators.

And then, of course, there was violence from other people. That was a threat to survival. Violence was used to settle disagreements and determine the leader of the tribe and protect resources and territory. It was used even in sacrificial ways.

So, your brain was constantly kind of scanning for threats, scanning for things that were going to endanger your survival. So, if you heard a rustle in the grass or you saw a shadow up ahead, your brain was like, "Oh god, what is that? Is that a threat? Am I okay?"

Your stress response, that fight or flight response was activated. And it was really a good thing.

Now, here's the thing. I want you to consider that that's the environment that your brain evolved in. And now, think about it, that very primitive

operating system, it's still alive and well. But think about the actual threats to you right now.

I don't mean out in the world. I mean right now, wherever you happen to be, whatever you happen to be doing. Now, I'm recording this episode from my office. It's protected from the environment. I'm in a temperature-controlled room. I can walk downstairs to a pantry and a fridge stocked with food. I can walk across the hallway to a bathroom and turn on the tap and have as much clean water as I want. I can lock the doors to my home. and if I have a disagreement with my neighbor, I'm not going to come to blows with them. We're probably going to exchange some text messages and figure it out.

So, right now I'm pretty darn safe. But that doesn't mean that the primitive part of my brain, that part that's always scanning for danger, always looking for threats has gone offline. It's still alive and well. It's still scanning for danger all the time.

But now danger looks very different. It looks like what I'm reading about in the news and my to-do list and my schedule. It looks like traffic. It looks like the line in the grocery store. My brain is still scanning and interpreting danger all around me. But I have to be on top of my brain. I have to understand how this operating system works so that I can say, "Hey, listen, we're okay. We're safe. All is good. I know that that stress response just activated, it just kicked in, but I'm okay. I'm here My needs are taken care of."

That doesn't mean that danger doesn't exist. Of course, it does exist. It just means that what your primitive brain things is a problem and is going to kill you is often not really.

Now, on the flipside of this, you have the reward response in your brain. So, your brain wasn't just scanning for danger. It's also scanning for

rewards and seeking out things that will help you stay alive. Things like food and water and warmth and sex.

And I include sex because, of course, while that might not help your immediate survival, it helps the survival of the species. So your brain learned to connect all of these activities to the reward response.

And in a dangerous would, when stepping out of the cave meant encountering the terrain and predators and the elements and other humans, in a dangerous world, the best way to motivate humans is to step outside the cave and go find these things that would help our survival was to make them rewarding, connected to that pleasure response in the brain.

Now, this system has been in operation for as long as humans have been around. But I want you to consider that for most of human history, it was very hard to go overboard on these types of pleasure.

So, you couldn't just open your fridge or open an app or get in your car and find food. You had to track animals and set snares and fish and hunt. You had to forage and grow food. You had to process and preserve that food for later. And you had to protect it from other humans and predators and scavengers.

You couldn't just turn on your tap and get a glass of water. You needed to locate a fresh water source and figure out how to store it and purify it so that it could be ready to drink. And staying warm meant chopping down trees and processing wood and capturing a spark and keeping that fire alive and going.

So, pleasure felt good for that human brain, but it was also very hard to overdo it. It took a lot of time and energy and resources to obtain. There was very little instant gratification. And of course, our modern environment has really turned that equation on its head.

Ep #247: Urge Worry

Food is fast. It's loaded with sugar. Portions are supersized. We have unlimited entertainment we have one-click shopping. And the same is true of alcohol. It's easier to get. It's served in larger portions. It's stronger. And it's more socially acceptable to drink it more times.

So, we've always had these urges to go get pleasure. That was part of the original operating system. Scan for threats, go get pleasure. We've always had these urges, but now our urges are existing in this modern world where rewards are everywhere and they're immediate and they're easy.

There's so much chance for us to go overboard. So you start to understand that and you start to see the urges are normal, the desire for pleasure is normal. What's not normal is the world that I live in. What's not normal is how intense and concentrated humans have made the rewards in our environment and how easy we've made it to get them and to get more of them instantly with very little energy. That's what's not normal.

But the problem is that most people don't understand this piece. They don't understand that that primitive part of the brain is always looking for these two things. It's always scanning for danger and seeking out rewards. So, they don't understand that piece, how that brain really operates. And then they start to have desire and urges and wantings and longings and cravings and they don't regard the urges as normal.

They don't say, "Oh, of course I'm having urges. My brain was designed to work this way." They see the urges as a problem, as an anomaly. They see it like something has gone wrong. When of course, nothing has gone wrong.

The human brain is supposed to have desire. It's supposed to have cravings and urges. What it's not supposed to do is not know how to deal with them, not know how to respond.

Ep #247: Urge Worry

And hundreds of thousands of years ago, we didn't have to worry about that. Because it was just very hard to overdo it. It was very hard to go overboard because of the environment that we lived in.

But now, we really need to know. And P.S. not just with alcohol. With food. With everything online, with the phone that's in your pocket. We have urges about everything. We can get instant gratification with so much, so it's even more important now that we know how to manage our mind and we know how to respond to these urges differently. And it starts with understanding how the brain works.

Urges aren't a problem because they're just a little bit of restlessness. They're not a big deal. They go away on their own. What makes them a big deal is all of the thoughts, all of the story that we attach to these urges, "Oh my god, I have to have it. I need it. I hate this urge. I want it to go away. I have too many urges. It goes on forever. It lasts forever."

None of that is true. Your brain thinks that it needs something that's important for survival, when in fact you can look at all of these things, these really intense urges that you have, whether it's for alcohol or to check your email. And once you have this information you can be like, "Oh, you're just confused. That primitive part of my brain is just confused. It doesn't understand which rewards are good, which rewards help with survival. It just understands rewards are important, rewards matter."

It's up to you and your ability to use your higher brain to say, "Listen, I can put into different categories the rewards that actually are important for me to stay alive, and the ones that my brain thinks it needs but rally doesn't need at all."

Another way that you can kind of start to change the story that you have about urges is to consider really what does it feel like? What does an urge feel like?

Ep #247: Urge Worry

Most people, when they come to the 30-day challenge, they'll say one of two things, "It feels terrible. My urges feel terrible. I hate saying no. It's so uncomfortable." Or they'll say, "I don't know. I have no idea." So interesting, right?

People really come and they're like, "It's awful," or, "I have no idea. Not even sure that it's there." I was really thinking about this recently and thinking about, you know, when you have the urge for something, whether it is a glass of wine or a piece of chocolate, or a cigarette, whatever it is, when you have the urge for something and you know you've decided that you're going to say yes to it, that you're going to have the drink when you end your workday or going to have chocolate after dinner, when you know that you're going to say yes, the urge is not a problem at all.

You aren't like, "Oh my god, this is terrible. I hate it. Make it go away." In fact, it's kind of enjoyable. Because the urge itself isn't the problem. It's your resistance to it. The urge itself is just like this little whoosh. It's just like this little doorbell from your brain being like, "Ding-dong, hello, have you thought about having a drink? Dong-dong, hello, have you thought about having food? Have you thought about having chocolate?"

That's all it is. What comes next, that's where all the discomfort comes in. When you say, "Oh yeah, I did think about it and I'm going to do it," your brain is like, "Okay, cool." You're not like, "Oh my god…"

What comes next, that's where people get so much discomfort because then it's like, "Oh my god, why did the ding-dong happen?" It's kind of ridiculous when you say it that way. But sometimes, that's what I like to do is just kind of play with the language.

When you call it a doorbell, when you call it a false alarm, all of a sudden, you're like, "Oh, wait, maybe this isn't that big of a deal. Maybe my lower brain wants me to believe it's a big deal because it's confused. It thinks that

the glass of wine is important for survival. When I know it's not important at all."

It thinks that the chocolate bar is important for survival when I know that it's not, or that checking my email or checking my phone or seeing what's next, whether or not anyone commented on my post is important. But it's not important at all.

So, not only can you start to change the story that you have about it, you can start to see that all the things that you've made it mean, "Oh my god, I have too many urges…" No, of course you don't. You don't have too many urges. They're not a big deal. Your brain was designed to have urges. What you have is too much judgment of it.

Or when you say, "Oh well something must be wrong with my brain…" no, your brain is working perfectly. What's wrong is this environment that we have put the human brain in and given people zero instruction for how to manage it. Just like, "Good luck, have fun."

Or people will use the presence of urges to mean, "I just must really want to do this. I don't want to say no." Of course you don't want to say no. That primitive brain isn't assessing whether or not the reward of the moment is actually helping survival. It's just programmed to think that all rewards help survival.

What you have to start to do is just depersonalize the urge. Instead of making it mean it's just some kind of indictment or indicative of your ability to change, you can just say, "Oh yeah, of course my brain is wired this way. My brain learned that in certain situations, when I felt certain ways, when I did certain things, that it would get a reward. And now it wants to encourage me to do that. That's the baseline operating system that's running in the brain.

Ep #247: Urge Worry

Now, the good news is that yes, everyone has this baseline operating system. But you aren't just your primitive brain. You have a higher brain as well that you can start to use to really assess what's going on and question and come up with a different story and make the urge mean something else.

Give it a new name. Maybe instead of calling it an urge, you call it a false alarm. Maybe instead of calling it an urge, you call it a doorbell. You start to change the story of it. And that's what starts to take away the worry. That's what makes it so that urges stop being such a big deal or a problem. And it's just like, "Yeah, it's a doorbell. But I'm not going to answer it. I know who's waiting for me. Don't want to talk to them."

You have so much power to really reframe all of this. You don't need a new brain. Your brain isn't broken. Nothing has gone wrong. Everything's working just as it should. What you need to do now is just really start to see that you're in charge of the story that you tell. 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.