

Ep #255: Why Humans Avoid Feelings



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With Your Host

Rachel Hart

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Ep #255: Why Humans Avoid Feelings

You are listening to the Take A Break podcast with Rachel Hart, episode 255.

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 everyone, I'm just going to start off by saying something that I have said here before on this podcast, and I learned it from my former boss when we would be writing speeches together or writing op-eds together and then we would just lose the draft to the computer gods.

She would say, "Rachel, it's always better the second time around." And I'm going to tell you, I just recorded most of this podcast without hitting record. And I did it and I was like, oh okay, it's always better the second time around.

So there you go. That's how I'm starting off today. But I want to tell you, I wanted to do this podcast today because I was leading a class for other life coaches. So I was teaching a class on really using the tools that I subscribe to and teach and how these coaches can use them to really up-level the work that they do with their own clients.

And as I was teaching it, I realized there was a concept here that I wanted to share with you all. I don't talk about it a lot on the podcast, although it really does come up if you do the 30-day challenge, if you do the advanced work with me inside Take A Break.

We do talk about this, but I feel like I haven't done enough of it on the public podcast. So if you have listened to me for a while, if you've read my book, if you have ever taken part in the 30-day challenge, you know that

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while I talk about changing your relationship with alcohol and changing the habit, it's so much bigger than that.

Changing your relationship with alcohol, it's not about quantity. It's not to me about okay, did you drink, or did you not drink? Did you say that you were only going to have two and then you had two? It's not an issue of quantity. It's about changing your relationship with yourself and how you show up with yourself.

And I think the mistake that too many people make is this belief that we have been sold around drinking, but frankly, around many things in our life that if only I solve this problem, then I'm going to solve all my problems, and everything is going to fall into place.

I know I thought that for a very long time. I really thought like, "God, why am I such a screwup? Why can't I figure this out? I should know better, I should have learned my lesson, it's causing all these problems in my life. If only I could figure out my drinking, I would figure everything out."

Now, unfortunately, and fortunately, but unfortunately it's not true. I say unfortunately because I know there are people out there hearing me say this and they're like, ugh, great. So you're saying like, I'm going to do all this work to change my relationship with alcohol and then discover that something is really wrong with me.

That's not what I'm saying. What I'm saying is that you have desires that are bigger than the glass of wine or the cocktail or the beer. You have bigger desires. And when you start working on changing the habit and changing your drinking, guess what? All those desires are going to surface. They're all going to become very clear to you.

And that is a good thing. That's why I say it is fortunately true that just changing the quantity that you drink doesn't just change your life. Because

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to me, this work really is a stepping stone to help you evolve to the next version of your life. And I didn't realize that.

When I started out, when I was beginning my own journey, I had no idea. I just wanted to not be such a screwup. I just wanted to no longer wake up hungover and full of regret and embarrassment about what I did and how I acted the night before. That was really the be all and end all of my goal.

I didn't realize that everything that I now know and that I learned on this journey and that I teach to all of you, it really is about evolving to the next version of yourself. And I really do believe there is nothing more exciting than that, especially because a lot of people, once we become adults, we think that the evolution is over.

We think like, well, this is just who I am, an old dog can't learn new tricks. And what I have discovered and what I see with my clients all the time is that you just surprise yourself over and over again about how much you can change and evolve and grow and become a different version of yourself. And that to me is very exciting.

So in this class that I was teaching today, teaching these life coaches, I was talking about avoiding the truth of your life. The truth of your life is not what you think. I'm not talking about the truth of my life is that I didn't live up to my potential, or I've missed a bunch of opportunities, or I'm behind my peers, or I've made all these crappy decisions. That is not what I'm talking about, that is not the truth of your life.

The truth of your life is simply how you feel in this moment. Because your experience of right now, your experience of this moment is your emotional experience. It's how you're currently feeling.

Now, that doesn't mean if you're currently stressed or angry or sad or bored that that's going to be your life forever. It means that is the truth of what you are experiencing right now, and it can change in a second, it can

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change in a day. But it can change. It's just this is what's going on for you right now.

Now, of course, when the truth of your life, when your current emotional experience is not something that you particularly like, most people try to avoid it. This is where numbing and buffering comes in. These ways in which we try to seek out external rewards to create a false pleasure in our brain, or seek our distractions to try to escape from how we're feeling.

This is where numbing and buffering comes in. Now, this can happen with drinking. It can look like I just feel really anxious at these social events, or I'm really stressed when I see my family, or I'm bored after work. And so the solution, you believe, is let's pour a drink. Let's try to find that external reward to create that false pleasure to try to escape from how I feel.

But here's the thing, it can be drinking, it can be a host of other things. It can be reaching for food when you're not hungry, or buying stuff that you don't need, or scrolling endlessly through social media. It can be going down a Netflix rabbit hole or seeking out excessive attention or sex.

It can be the 80-hour workweeks when you're just always working, and you never have nights or never have weekends. It can be needing to keep yourself busy, always doing something, always working on a to-do list, or cleaning, or organizing. It can be doom scrolling through the news. It can be overdoing it with exercise.

I see this so often inside the 30-day challenge. People who are athletes, they do marathons and triathlons and either they didn't have another way to deal with the truth of their life in the moment, which is how they were feeling other than through exercise, so they would run to the point where they weren't listening to their body when their body was saying, hey, pay attention, we don't feel good, we're going to get injured.

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And they would injure themselves, and then while they were injured, while they were recuperating, they noticed things like, oh, my drinking has really gone up, or my eating has really gone up. It can be all of those things. It can be sleeping.

This is not even the entire list. And the idea here is not to focus on is it a good activity or a bad activity. The idea is just to understand how you're using it and why you're using it and whether or not it is giving you the results that you like.

So what I want you to understand is that avoiding how you feel, it doesn't just happen with a drink. It isn't just limited to alcohol. It can show up in so many ways and until you address the root issue, which is why are you avoiding how you feel, you're probably going to get caught in this loop of I make progress and then I backslide.

Or I see this happen a lot, people will start making progress in one area, so they take a break from drinking, and then all of a sudden it's like, okay, I'm just eating more, or I'm wasting all this time on my phone. So you really - getting to the root of this isn't about the activity as much as understanding why you keep going back to it.

So the question then is, it's really kind of simple. It's why do humans want to avoid their feelings? And I'm not just talking about people that struggle with the habit of drinking. I mean all humans. Why do we want to avoid our feelings?

So I think it really boils down to two reasons. One is your nervous system. And so we're wired in a way that emotions are like, danger. So imagine, just imagine this. I talk a lot here about changing your understanding of emotions and your response to emotions.

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But imagine if an early human was like, oh, I feel fear, that's no big deal. That would not be a good thing for survival, right? Your nervous system wants you really to pay attention to your emotions. So that's one piece.

The other reason why I think people want to avoid their feelings or find themselves stuck in that deeper habit is because they have been conditioned to believe that certain emotions are good or bad or right or wrong.

I mean, even the way I talk about it, I'll often talk about positive emotions and negative emotions because especially when people are first starting to get fluency around being able to be in touch with the emotions and name them, sometimes it really just helps to say is it positive or negative?

But when we have that dichotomy, when we're thinking that some are bad or wrong or negative, guess what we're going to do? We're going to try to avoid them. And also, I don't want you to think that it's just all amazing when it comes to positive emotions, and no one struggles with that.

We get so many messages, and I see this come up with my clients so often where it's like, well, I was just always told like, don't be too happy, don't be too excited, don't be too proud of yourself. And so they end up not only avoiding negative emotions but often avoiding positive emotions as well.

So sometimes reaching for that drink is like, oh, well, it's okay for me to really go into this positive emotion because I have a buzz or because alcohol is making it allowable. But normally it's like, I'm not sure we should do that either.

So we really are conditioned to see our emotions as things that are good or bad, right, and wrong, including positive emotions. Here's the thing; when your nervous system is wired to view a lot of emotions as danger, and when we're conditioned to believe that certain emotions are good or bad, right, or wrong, then guess what?

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Of course most emotions are not going to be safe for us to feel. We're going to need to avoid them. And avoiding happens in the form of numbing or buffering.

So on the one hand, we can look at our emotions from this distance when we're not in the moment of experiencing it, and we can say, oh, it's just like a release of hormones and neurotransmitters that are affecting my body chemistry, and that changes my breathing and my temperature and my blood flow and my body position and muscle tension, and these changes are no big deal, they're totally harmless vibrations.

But you know what? They feel like a big deal. You can understand the intellectual concept that yeah, life isn't supposed to be just rainbows and unicorns all the time, where there's light there is dark, we're supposed to have this contrast, I don't want someone whom I love to die and then feel happy, I don't want to witness a human rights violation and feel peaceful about it.

Life is supposed to be this mix of human emotion, mix of 50/50. But I mean, man, it sure feels wrong when I'm knee-deep in the muck, when I'm knee-deep in anger and anxiety and shame and guilt and sadness.

And finally, I think logically, we can kind of understand, humans need to feel our feelings. That makes sense. If it isn't processed, it's just going to come out sideways. You can only hold things back for so long before you start to feel like a pressure cooker.

But then kind of in reality, it's like, oh God, but I feel like I'm just in a swamp of stress and anxiety, and you're telling me to feel my feelings? You're telling me to feel more of this?

So I think it's really important to understand that logically, we can kind of understand that they're not a big deal and we're supposed to have the

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positive and the negative, and we need to process them. But that's not what most people are able to do in actuality.

Not because they're doing anything wrong, but because their wiring and their conditioning can make it very challenging to interact with your emotions in this kind of set apart, observer, logical way. It's a little bit like, I don't know how to do that, pass the drink, pass the food, hand me my phone, give me something to do.

That is avoiding the truth of your life. That's avoiding the truth of how you feel in any given moment. And it really can be only avoided for so long before all your attempts at numbing and buffering are going to create some secondary consequences.

You're going to start now dealing on top of it with the regret from how much you drank last night, or the hangover, or gaining weight, or feeling like you're wasting time, or spending money that you shouldn't or that you don't have, or losing your nights and weekends because you're working all the time.

Whatever the kind of secondary consequences are. And so we can't engage with the truth of our life, which is how we feel in any given moment, we can't engage unless we start to create emotional safety for ourselves. And that really is something that you can start to do right now, start to examine your level of emotional safety. I'm going to explain what this means.

But I will tell you that I find that most people have pretty similar reactions when I start discussing emotional safety. So the first one is, oh, you mean how other people make me unsafe. You mean like, surrounding myself with people who make me feel safe.

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No, that's not what I'm talking about. I'm talking about you. What are you doing to create and start to build and develop emotional safety for yourself? So that's number one. It's not about other people. It's about you.

Number two is the reaction and by the way, this was my reaction at first. Like, that sounds a little hokey. I don't know, just buck up, stop being so soft, you're an adult. So there's this kind of level of this is childish, I should be beyond this.

But as I have done this work with myself, as I've done with this work thousands of people inside Take A Break, this is the piece that I see time and time again that is missing. And you can't change your relationship with alcohol or your desire to escape how you feel and try to numb and buffer the truth of your life away with anything.

It doesn't matter if it's alcohol or not. You can't do that without creating emotional safety for yourself. So I want to share with you what I think are the three parts to creating emotional safety. We're going to talk about them and then I'm going to ask you to really - after this episode is over, just really examine for yourself what your level of safety is in each of these areas.

So the three parts are acknowledge, validate, and explore. Okay, acknowledge. So this is pretty basic, but it's incredibly profound. It really is going from like, I don't know, I just feel off, I don't know, I just feel meh, I don't know, I'm just blah.

That's how I used to describe my emotions all the time. It was not actually with emotion words. It was off, or meh. So just being able to say I'm feeling angry, I'm feeling sad, I'm feeling lonely, I can't even explain how powerful this is. It's so powerful to be able, first, to do with yourself.

It seems simple. But I promise you, it's not. It's incredibly powerful to start to be able to do this with people in your life. That to me was really next-

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level work, to be able to approach my husband and say, “This is how I’m feeling right now.”

Not to make it his problem, not to throw it on him, but just to acknowledge like, this is the truth of what’s going on for me. Because there are so many emotions that frankly like, I didn’t want to feel. Like no thank you, I didn’t want to acknowledge that they were there.

The second piece is to validate how you’re feeling. And when I say validate, what I mean is it’s okay to feel this way. You’re not a bad person, you’re not doing it wrong. A lot of coaches, when I was teaching this today, I talk about how a lot of life coaches will make it mean, oh, I’m not coaching myself properly, I’m doing it wrong as a coach if I feel this way.

But however you feel is okay. It doesn’t need to be justified, it doesn’t need a reason. It’s just okay. It’s not good or bad, right, or wrong. And then the last piece is the ability to explore how you’re feeling. Can you stay present with this emotion? Can you be curious about it?

Now, I was just teaching a call inside Take A Break. Today was a busy day. But I was teaching a call inside Take A Break and I was talking about how the foundational skills that I teach with allowing urges and really instead of just giving into them or being annoyed that they’re there or trying to push them away, to just really allow it and be curious about it and staying present with it, that actually is the foundational skill.

Not just to start to change your response when you feel that desire to drink come up. It’s the foundational skill to really change how you respond to all of your emotions. So these are the three pieces. Acknowledge, validate, and explore.

Now, what most people do, and I think what a lot of people do when they start listening to me talk about the think-feel-act cycle and how our thoughts create our feelings and our feelings drive our action and how you really

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need to understand that if you're going to change habits, people kind of get in this place of like, okay, so just tell me the new thought to think. What do I need to think instead?

I was in this place when I started doing this work at first too. I was like, okay, so it's like my thoughts are the problem, give me the new thought. The problem is when you have that mentality, when you're rushing to find the right thought to think, it's just reinforcing that how you feel right now isn't safe.

And I think it's kind of reinforced by what a lot of us heard as kids. So I will just say, I think most people don't have any idea about what emotional safety is or how to create it for themselves, and neither did their parents. So I think a lot of us heard as kids, things like, "You're fine, don't cry, it's not that bad, stop being so dramatic, stop making a big deal."

So we got a lot of messages about how we were feeling was wrong. And then as we grow up, we start to use these same statements against ourselves. We start to tell ourselves like, we're being silly, I'm fine, I'm being overdramatic, it's not a big deal, I really shouldn't feel this way.

And so most of us go through childhood just not even having any kind of emotional safety at all. It's not modeled, it's not something that we're taught about, and it's certainly not something that we're shown how to create for ourselves.

So most people find that it wasn't safe for them as kids to experience emotions. That safety wasn't modeled. A lot of people grow up in households where there's simmering under the surface, all this tension, all this stress that's never acknowledged.

The parents fight and nobody ever talks about it. The only thing that people talk about when it comes to emotions often is stop it, stop feeling that way.

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And I think really understanding that we don't learn this when we're kids, people around us don't know how to model it for us, it really is so important.

But I will tell you this; it was a really challenging thing for me to acknowledge because I immediately wanted to go to like, I don't know, you didn't have emotional safety as a kid, stop being so dramatic. All your needs were met, you're physically safe.

It felt as if, of course, because there was a lot of you're fine, don't make such a big deal, don't be so dramatic, it felt like oh God, this is just me being dramatic again.

But when you really boil it down to like, okay, were you taught how to acknowledge your emotions? Were you taught how to validate them and that they were okay no matter how you are feeling? Were you taught how to explore them, how to be present in your body, how to be curious about how you are feeling, or did you see a lot of people that were using a lot of things to numb and buffer how they felt?

You really have the opportunity to examine your own level of emotional safety. What does it look like for you right now? Are there feelings that you're like, yeah, I don't do that?

For me, for a long time it was like, I don't do sadness, no thank you, I'm very comfortable with anger, but sadness, I don't want to do. So are there emotions that you just don't even want to acknowledge are there? Are you even comfortable saying I feel x? I feel bored, I feel lonely.

I remember saying that for the first time I truly was experiencing so much loneliness in my life. And it was - I remember it took me half an hour to get the words out. It was just like, admitting it to myself just felt like, some sort of huge failure. But of course, as soon as I just said it out loud, as soon as I just acknowledged that I felt lonely, it was like, things all were able to shift for me.

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But when I wouldn't acknowledge it, what was I doing? I was just numbing and buffering over it. Notice when it comes to validation, what are the emotions and feelings that you have that you write off as, that's silly, I shouldn't feel this way, or I feel too much of this.

There's too much of this emotion in my life. So you're not validating what's going on. You're either diminishing or kind of demonizing. And then how much do you stay present and curious with how you feel and what's happening in your body?

This is such a huge shift for people. It was a huge shift for me, it's a huge shift for my clients. When you're really able to be present, most people don't know how to take up residence in their body. I want you to really think about that.

Most people when it comes to taking up residence in their body are like, I don't want to be here. And there's so much power of just being able to reside in your body and being okay with what's happening in your body and not needing to drink something or eat something or scroll through your phone or obsessively read the news or work all the time or spend your day waiting for like, okay, what's my reward going to be at the end of the day.

But to just be present in your body, to take up residence there no matter what is happening, that is just utterly transformational. I really do think that the shift here, the change here, it's learning that resilience isn't about deleting the negative emotions.

It's not like, okay, if I can just delete the stress and the anxiety and the boredom and the loneliness and the anger, whatever else it is, the deprivation, then I can finally change my relationship with alcohol or my relationship with food.

No, it's really understanding that resilience is just knowing that you can handle whatever is happening, whatever your emotional experience is, you

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can handle it on your own. And all of this really is about I think shifting out of this place of kind of fix me goals.

So I see fix me goals as kind of like, I really got to change my drinking, I really got to change my eating, I really got to change my spending. Now listen, I think that all of those goals are totally worthwhile and very powerful and can change your life. But I also watch people spin here.

I also watch people use all of their mental energy in this kind of I got to fix myself. And I just think listen, we've got limited mental energy. Do we want to work on the fix me goals, or do we want the fix me goals to be the springboard into okay, what really are my deeper desires?

What are my goals related to creation? What are my unique ideas? What are the things that I can create, or I can invent that nobody else can? What are the things that I can bring to life that no one else can do it because they don't have my brain, they don't see the world the way that I do, they don't have my unique set of life experience?

That to me is so much more exciting. You can use your mental energy to keep chasing after the fix me goals, or you can use those goals of I want to change my relationship with alcohol so that I can have the springboard to evolving to the next version of myself, to using my mental energy towards creation rather than looking at myself as a problem that needs to be fixed.

But I will say that that is not possible unless you really understand on a deep level all of the ways in which you numb and buffer. And unless you really start understanding and practicing, okay, so how do I create emotional safety for myself?

Creating emotional safety is about creating a life of your wildest dreams. That's what I think. So that's what I wanted to share with all of you today because as I was teaching this, I really saw that this is a concept that really everyone needs to understand and can be so tremendously powerful.

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Now, if you are a coach listening to this podcast and if you want to do this work with me on a deeper level, I am teaching in January an advanced certification all about numbing and buffering and really doing this deeper level work and starting to create this container of emotional safety.

I will be teaching that in mid-January. So if you're a coach and you're interested in that, you can head on over to rachelhart.com/ac. And that will take you to the page that gives you all the information about that.

But listen, you don't have to be a coach to want to do this. I think that this work, it's so important, it's so transformative for all the habits, all the ways in which you feel like you're kind of compulsively going towards something, whether it's alcohol or food or your phone or work or to-do lists or whatever, to start to kind of take back the control.

This is really how you do the deeper work and get to the real root of what is going on. Because the truth of your life is that however you're feeling right now, however you're feeling right now, it really can become the stepping stone to who you can become. 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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