

Ep #257: Fading Affect Bias + Drinking



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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 257.

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 back, my friends. We're talking about something today called fading affect bias, and I decided I wanted to teach it on the podcast because it came up recently inside Take A Break. So, there was a member there who was talking about, you know, what she had learned about this idea and how it really resonated with her. But I could see that the way she was thinking about it was actually very problematic. And it's one of the reasons why I've never taught fading affect bias as it pertains to drinking.

I have never talked about it on the podcast because I really believe that when it comes to drinking and this idea, pretty much everyone out there teaches it in a very harmful way. So, I realized I wanted to bring it to you, but I wanted to bring it to you in a way that would be really beneficial. And in a way that you wouldn't use it against yourself. This is what so often, we have the tendency to do we learn these ideas and concepts, and then we kind of weaponize them against ourselves.

So, I want to clarify from the outset that this is not what we're doing here. Okay, so, just a very quick summary because I know this will be a new concept for many of you. Fading affect bias is really simply the idea that bad memories fade faster than good ones. Okay, and it applies to life; it's not just unique to drinking. So, you can think about it outside of the realm of drinking. You can think like, you know that time that you took a vacation, and when you think back on it, you are more likely to remember, oh, god,

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that amazing time at the beach rather than the three-hour wait through security at the airport.

When you do that, you remember that, like, oh, that amazing time at the beach that we had. We think that, oh, we should totally go on vacation again. You can also think of fading affect bias as a kind of the human pertinacity to reminisce about the good old days. So, you know what this sounds like. Humans have a tendency to look back on the past with a lot of fondness. So, I do this with my own son, who is now three and a half, I think about him as a baby, and I am like, oh, he was so cute, and his cheeks were so chubby, and he just kind of cooed at me and it's just all rosy.

I'm not thinking in those moments about the sleepless nights, or all the trouble that he had nursing, or how it was so frustrating. It really was just so frustrating not knowing, like, why is this baby upset? What does he want? Just tell me what you want, but he didn't have words to communicate with me. No, where my knee-jerk reaction goes to is this kind of nostalgia, this wistful longing for the past where things were just kind of magically amazing and better. Except, you know, I had the full human experience at the time, but when I look back, you know the cute little chubby cheeks.

So, maybe fading affect bias for you has nothing to do with babies. Maybe it's about childhood, high school, college, first boyfriend or girlfriend, when you were single, living abroad, maybe you hear me say all those things, and you're like, no, like all of that was pretty rotten. But I encourage you just to find a part of your life where you notice that you look back with nostalgia. And it's really important to remind yourself, you know, you were having the full human experience back then, just as you have the full human experience, right now.

Sometimes, you are happy, sometimes you are sad, sometimes you feel connected, sometimes you feel lonely, sometimes you are confident, other

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times you are fearful. But because of how fading affect bias works in the brain, you are more apt to remember all that was good. But listen, it wasn't all rainbows and butterflies back then. So, that's the first thing to know, is that it can happen in all areas of your life, not just with drinking, and there's a reason for this. And I think it's important that you understand what that reason is.

So, scientists who study the brain believe that there is an evolutionary reason that we tend to remember positive memories over negative ones. Because having a positive outlook on life is a really powerful coping mechanism. And you know, part of it, you know, is that most people prefer to reminisce with others about things that were good. We like to talk about the good things that happen.

So, fading affect bias is kind of this unconscious mechanism that we are reinforcing to really help ourselves feel more optimistic about the future and regulate negative emotions. And you can think about it in terms of the think, feel, and act cycle. Which we talk about all of the time on the podcast. So, think, feel, and act is really understanding your actions don't just happen. They don't just appear out of the clear blue sky. They're driven by what you're thinking and how you're feeling in the moment.

When you have hopeful thoughts, you are more likely to take action. So, if we want it like, go all the way back in time and think about early humans, and early humans needing to find food if the brain was like, ugh, that's going to be hard. Like, remember how difficult it was in the past? Remember how long it took? Remember how we kept searching and searching and coming up empty-handed? That's not terribly motivating. You feel kind of defeated before you even get started. You're less likely to take action.

So, this bias towards a positive outlook for the past, it's not just about feeling good. It really is when we feel more positive, we're more likely to

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take beneficial action. It helps survival. So, fading affect bias is real. You can find it happening in many areas of your life. But it especially comes up when it comes to changing a habit, especially like drinking.

So, I was coaching the other day, and the woman who brought up fading affect bias was in the middle of taking a break from drinking. And she was saying like, I feel healthier. I feel more kind of even keel. I am really proud of the progress that I have been making, but I have been slowly noticing these thoughts start to creep in. Like, you know, maybe drinking every day wasn't that bad. Maybe I am being over-dramatic.

Suddenly all of her compelling reasons that got her to initially decide to change her relationship with alcohol. I want to take a break. I want to do this work. All of those compelling reasons started to feel to her like they were fading away. She was a little concerned with this. She was kind of like; I am here. I don't know, and drinking sounds kind of good right now. It's hard to remember all of the negatives. What am I supposed to do?

Now, the first thing that I just want to reinforce for all of you this is totally normal. This happens to most people. It's certainly happened to me over and over again. When I didn't even know that fading affect bias even existed. So, I would have one really bad night where I really went overboard, and I would wake up the next morning like, oh my god, I felt physically terrible. I was hungover, and I was also just soaked in shame and regret. I was trying to piece together what happened. What kind of stupid thing I did, and in the depths of my pain, I can't even tell you the number of times that I was like, oh my god, Rachel, never again.

We're never doing this again. We're just never drinking again. This is too painful. I can't even tell you how many times I swore off alcohol. And I do talk about this a lot on the podcast; you know, the thing that finally transformed things for me was that I decided at one point that I was going to stop swearing off alcohol. Like it stopped being about, okay, you can

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never drink again, which is often what we hear. It's like you just have to make a decision that you're just not going to do this, and you're just going to say no for the rest of your life. I realized I don't think that's working. I have sworn it off a lot, and it doesn't really seem to be working.

What if, instead, I focus on how do I start to create the benefits that alcohol creates for me? That's what I kind of want to bring in the conversation of fading affect bias. Because if you have ever been in that situation of being like, oh my god, I am never going to do this again, this was terrible. I am never going to forget that I felt this way. And then you know, like a week, month, three months later, fading affect bias kicks in like, I don't know, was it really that bad, maybe I am making a big deal, maybe I am being overdramatic. It's so important for you to figure out how to deal with it so that it isn't weaponizing it against yourself and isn't going deeper into shame and regret.

Because this is what I think most people in my space get wrong. So, the vast majority of people who work on the topic of drinking and changing your relationship with alcohol and changing the habit are like, oh, fading affect bias. This is like kryptonite for someone who's not drinking. It is a really bad problem, so their advice sounds a lot like this; remind yourself how shitty you felt back then, right? Their advice is you've got to remember, why did you quit drinking in the first place?

When you start feeling nostalgia, when you start thinking about the good old days, and maybe it wasn't that bad, you have to write down every shameful, embarrassing, upsetting detail of things that happened when you were drinking. You have to remember the anxiety, hangover, kind of go into self-loathing. And the advice is like bring it all up. I think the other piece is to go read other people's awful stories.

So, maybe you go to an AA meeting? Maybe you are reading a type of sober lit, and if you can't remember how bad it is for you, go listen to other

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people's awful stories. Listen to the screwed-up things they did while they were drinking. So, in short, the advice is like, remind yourself how bad it is, keep the story of how drinking is terrible alive in your mind. That is the way to combat fading affect bias. I am going to tell you this; I tried this many times. I have pages and pages, and pages in my journals that are like, Rachel remember this night, remember this feeling, remember all of the bad decisions, remember all the regrets, remember every embarrassing thing you did. I really did kind of take this advice to heart because I think so often, not just with drinking, culturally we are so convinced that feeling terrible is the way to change and the way to feel better.

It's so backward when you think about it. And here's the thing, all of these pages, these journal pages that I was writing, guess what happened? It made me feel worse. Not only did it feel me with shame, but when the underlying belief of the habit is, hey, if I have a drink, I will feel better, right? That is so often the underlying belief that this drink is going to take the edge off. This drink is going to give me relief. This drink is going to make this more fun. This drink is going to make me feel better when that's the underlying belief. It's kind of the foundation of the habit.

Then you feel all this shame trying to combat fading affect bias by remembering every bad thing you ever did, every regret, every shameful moment, all the self-loathing; guess what people are more likely to do. They're more likely to drink, right? Because that's the underlying habit. The underlying habit is this thing is going to help me feel better, and when we try to combat fading affect bias by remembering how bad we felt in the past, it just brings up a lot of negative emotions for us.

I really do think this is a problem with the conventional approach to either stop drinking or drinking less. It's all about remembering the bad stuff, reminding yourself that alcohol is really harmful for your body, and telling yourself that you're poisoning yourself. The problem when you start to understand the think, feel, act cycle and you understand that all these

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sentences in your mind are creating how you feel, you see that all these negative thoughts, even if you mean for them to be helpful, are likely creating a lot of negative emotions for you.

Because when most people think about all the bad things they did when they had too much to drink and all the ways they mistreated their body, they feel shame and regret. Again, if the underlying habit is like, yeah, you have a drink, you will feel better, and we don't know what to do with the shame and regret, and we're taught to drink away your sorrows, you'll feel better, have a drink it will take the edge off, guess what they are more likely to do? Even after reminding themselves how bad it was for them and how terrible they felt, they're more likely to create even more desire to drink.

Then, here's what would happen for me. So, I would go into these moments, waking up, like, ugh, I was so stupid. Why did I do that? You know and swear that I was never going to drink again, and that would last for a week, a month, or whatever. Then the fading affect bias would start to kick in, and I'd be like, maybe it wasn't that bad, right? Then I would go to this place of I have to remind myself of how terrible it was, how stupid I was, all the ways in which I hurt myself, hurt other people, hurt my body, like, I go there, and I would just create a ton of shame and a ton of regret for myself.

Then, eventually, it was like the shame and regret became too much. I was like, okay, well, if I'm this screwed up, I might as well just drink. I remember having that thought so often. Like, if I am this screwed-up, I might as well just drink. Then, I would drink, and I would be like, oh my god, why can't you learn your lesson? What is wrong with you? Why do you keep doing something you know isn't good for you? I didn't know how to get out of this vicious kind of cycle.

But the problem was not fading affect bias. The problem was how I was approaching it. Because I will tell you this if you feel like you are caught in

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this vicious cycle where you are like, okay, I know I don't like the consequences, and then I find myself doing it again, and I can't understand why I can't learn my lesson. If you feel like you are kind of stuck in that the answer is not, oh, well, you know. In that case, it's because you have a real problem, or something is really wrong with you, something is really wrong with your brain, you may have a character defect, you have to admit that you're an alcoholic, you have to say no to alcohol for the rest of your life. That's not what's going on here.

The reason you're stuck in this vicious cycle is that you haven't yet done the work to really, on the deepest level, really understand how drinking is helping you, helping you. It sounds so counter-intuitive to people, like, oh my god, I can't think about like, the positives, right? I can't think about the benefits, but this really is the only way to create sustainable change.

Now, everyone out there is so dead set on, no, no focus on the downsides, focus on the harms. But listen, if there weren't an upside, you wouldn't be drinking. And unless you really do the work to uncover, for you, what the upside is, and it's different for everyone. You're never going to be able to learn the skills to figure out, okay, if these are the upsides that I am currently getting from drinking, and I know that it's not serving me, how do I figure out how to give those upsides to myself. How do I figure out how to support myself in this way without reaching for a drink?

There is no amount of trying to remind yourself how bad something is, that it's going to work. This is what I just feel like I can't hammer this home enough. Whether it's on the podcast or if it's inside *Take A Break*, you really have to understand how it's helping you. So often, people only want to look at one piece of the puzzle; it's bad for me, here are the consequences, here's how it's harming my relationships, or my body, like, let me just focus there. Listen, if there wasn't an upside, you wouldn't be reaching for it.

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So, what is it for you? It's different for everyone. Is it how you open up? Is it how you relax? Is it how you quiet the chatter in your mind? Is it how you feel less anxious or awkward? Is it how you deal with boredom or loneliness? Is it how you deal with deprivation? You have to understand that, and you have to also know that the idea that you can just say no, just say no to a drink. That's never going to be the solution.

Because just say no is basically like, okay, grit your teeth, use some willpower, and there are no additional tools. We're not actually going to teach you anything other than, like, how to push through. We don't even want to talk about the upsides because, god forbid, we talk about the upsides. Then you might believe that it's a good thing to do. Understanding the upsides is everything.

Otherwise, you're going to kind of feel like you are in this lose, lose situation. Because it's like, now, I am saying no, and I'm stuck at the end of the day with all of my anxiety. Now, I am saying no, and I am avoiding social events. Or now, I am saying no, and I am just bored in the evenings. If we don't focus on the upside piece, you're just going to be in this lose, lose situation. And there are no amount of health benefits that can make up for that.

Right, so, even the people who will say when it comes to fading affect bias they'll say, well, just write down all the ways your life has improved. You know, you can write down, like, well, I have no hangovers, more energy, more money, lost weight, no longer waking up feeling regretful about the choices I made last night. Listen, those benefits are real, and those benefits matter. But they're not going to make up for the fact if your habit is about using the drink as a way to unwind, or a way to socialize, or open up, or a way to access a kind of confident carefree, I don't care what anyone thinks, version of yourself, no amount of health benefits are actually going to make up for those deeper desires.

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And so, I want you then to understand what I am proposing as a solution when it comes to fading affect bias. It's not to remind yourself how shitty drinking is or how bad it is for you, and it's not to just remind yourself, yeah, that I feel physically good, right? I am saving all this money. The thing that will keep you committed is to really understand what's happening on the other side of fading affect bias. So, this is what I was saying, while memories of the hangover or the embarrassing situation, or whatever it was, while that might be fading, something at the same time is rising.

The negative effects of drinking are diminishing precisely because something is rising on the other side. And what's rising are all the benefits you've got from drinking. And that might sound like, boy, a drink sure would be nice right about now. Or this would be a better party. Or I'd be having more fun if I was drinking, or this conversation would be easier with a drink in my hand. I feel more relaxed. Something is rising on the other side, and this is your work. This is how we start to sustainably change the habit at the deepest level permanently.

To really understand what's rising on the other side, noticing a thought like, yeah, a drink sure would be nice right about now. To have that thought and then be able to say, okay, so what am I feeling right now? If I am telling myself that a drink would be really nice right now, how am I feeling? What is the emotion that I am trying to solve? Maybe it's deprivation; maybe it's something else. If you're thinking to yourself, this would be a better party... Okay, how are you feeling without it? Are you feeling bored?

If you're thinking, I would be having more fun if I was drinking, well, how are you feeling right now? Is it insecure, is it anxious, is it awkward? If you're thinking this conversation would be easier, or I would feel more relaxed, okay, so, how are you at this moment without the drink? Anxious, fearful, these feelings whatever is rising on the other side. They can't be solved by drinking.

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I mean, not really, right? I mean, maybe you can give yourself temporary rest from how you're feeling, but what happens is it just comes back the next day, the next time you're in the situation. And it always comes back stronger because you didn't actually solve how you were feeling on your own. You made your brain believe that alcohol was a solution.

So, what happens in the long run, is you make yourself less capable of handling your emotional experience in the future. So, whatever is rising on the other side, it can't be solved by drinking, but it also can't be solved by just saying no, by not drinking. Not drinking, yes, it will give you the space and the clarity to see; hey, what's really going on here? What's at the root cause? But it's not a panacea. It's not going to make everything magically better.

All your beliefs about how alcohol improves things and makes things better helps you relax and helps you become better. This was a big thing for me. I really truly believed that I was a better version of myself when I was drinking. All of those beliefs are what is rising when fading affect bias sets in. And this is a good thing because this is going to reveal to you your real work to really figure out, okay, what do I need to do to stop believing that a drink in my hand would make this situation better, help me feel better, help me cope better.

This is all about learning a skill set that no one ever teaches us. Think about how often in life the solution is just like, eat this, have a drink, right? So often, it's just like, turn on the TV. It's just like consuming something to feel better. We have to start learning the skill sets that nobody ever taught us. And I don't believe that the way out of fading affect bias is to remind ourselves of all the ways that we felt physically bad, all the shame, regret, and self-loathing, and all of that negative emotion about the past. That's not the way out.

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I have said this time and time again, and I will say it now; you can't hate yourself happy. You can't hate yourself healthy, either. And happy and healthy is what I wanted, right. I just wanted—I felt so stuck, I felt kind of like, why is it that I feel like I have this insatiable desire for all these things, not just alcohol but all of these things in my life. Why is it that I have this insatiable desire? Why do I feel like I can't really control my urges? Why do I have so much anxiety? Why does my mind worry so much? I just wanted to feel happy.

I wanted to feel like I could be me. Like, I could just open up and be my honest, truthful self, and that I liked who that person was. And be able to cope with whatever emotions came my way without reaching for a drink, something to eat, or something to distract myself. But listen, you're not going to get there by hating yourself and writing down every shameful, regretful, embarrassing, stupid thing you did while drinking. That is never the solution.

So, here's the thing, if you notice that fading affect bias is setting in or you know that it has happened for you in the past when you've tried to change your relationship with alcohol, what I want you to do, instead of going down that path of like, digging into how it was terrible, and you were terrible, and alcohol is terrible. I want you to just be curious about what is rising on the other side. What do you believe would be better with a drink? How do you believe you would feel better with a drink?

That work is about learning a skillset, learning how to actually use the think, feel, and act cycle that we talk about all the time on the podcast. Not just as some kind of interesting intellectual concept but actually something that you could put into practice when you are kind of knee-deep in the muck. It's about learning how to develop emotional resilience without believing the answers outside of you or that you need to just distract yourself until it goes away. When something fades, something is rising. Whatever is arising for you really is the key to changing your relationship with alcohol.

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Okay, so, here's the thing if you want to do this work with me in the New Year, and listen, if you're stuck in the habit, then what are you waiting for? What I want you to do is to head over to RachelHart.com/January, where you can reserve a spot in our January challenge. So, it always starts with a 30-day challenge, and that is really about freeing up space in your mind and body to truly examine your relationship with alcohol and use that as the time to start mastering the tools of habit change.

And from there, you can stay as little or as long as you'd like working with my team of coaches and me to build the skills you need for lasting permanent change. Whether your goal is to drink less, take an extended break, or explore an alcohol-free life, it doesn't matter. We are here to support you. So, make sure if you're interested, you go to RachelHart.com/January.

I will tell you, that is 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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