

Ep #8: Managing Urges



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With Your Host

Rachel Hart

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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.

Hey everybody. Welcome back. Hope you all had a great weekend. I actually got to spend my Sunday with one of my best girlfriends. She is someone that has known me for a very long time. We met shortly after graduating from college, and we were talking a lot about what motivates change, in part because since we have known each other for so long, we have both seen each other through different jobs, different relationships, different points in our life, you know, for me, especially she has watched me go through periods where I was drinking a lot and really struggling with my drinking and then trying to cut back and trying to take a break, and of course now, she sees me what I am doing today, how I am today, and so we were talking about change, and what really motivates change in our lives, and she said something that I thought was so interesting, and I wanted to share with you.

She talked about how for her when she thinks about change or something that she wants to do differently, she always looks at it as an experiment. So, she is trying something out, she is collecting data, she puts herself in the position of being the scientist, and I thought that that was such a great way to frame it, especially because so many of us, myself included for a very long time, looked at change and trying to change my behaviors and change my habits as an all or nothing enterprise. So, it wasn't about collecting data, it was really about, "I have to do this perfectly," "I have to get this right," "I can't make any mistakes," and I think that our framework is so helpful when thinking about a different way to embark on the process of change. A way to think about it as collecting data, and I wanted to share that with you today because today, we are going to be talking all about urges and what to do when the urge to drink appears, and I think if you can take this framework and this idea of thinking of what you are trying out as an experiment as something where you are collecting data, rather than, "I have to do it right," or "I am going to do it wrong," or "there is a perfect way to do it." I think that that will be really beneficial for you.

The idea of what do I do with the urge to drink is something that comes up all the time with people that I work with, and people will tell me, you know,

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they understand these tools, they really like the approach, they like that I have a different way of thinking about it, but what happens when they take a break, and all of a sudden, their urge to drink appears. What do they do with it, and some people will tell me, well, it's just so impossible to resist, I had to give in. It came on so strong or so suddenly or it was so intense that I didn't know what else to do with it, and I think that that is a really common experience, and so if we are going to understand what to do with it and there is a lot more that you can do than just resist or give in, if we are going to start to understand that. Before we go there, we have to really understand what an urge is.

So, I like to think about an urge is just part of the emotion of desire, and you are familiar with the emotion of desire. Now, we are talking about urges in the context of drinking, but we have the emotion of desire around lots of different things. It's just the emotion of wanting something, right? There is the emotion of being happy, there is the emotion of sadness, there is the emotion of anger. We have all these different emotions and this one is just the emotion of wanting something. So, you have the hankering for something. You wish you had it. You long for it. You yearn for it and you can feel this desire toward anything. You can feel it towards wanting to check your email or going out for a walk, you can lust after a car or an outfit or a vacation or you can also desire a drink.

So, desire is not just limited to drinking, it comes into our life around many different things, but one piece that is really important to understand is that people will describe and you will experience desire in very different ways, and so, sometimes, your desire, your want, your hankering, your longing for something is quite calm. I would like to have it. I would like to have a piece of cake. I would like to go for a walk. You know, it has this calm energy around it. It doesn't feel insistent, and other times, you experience exact opposite. There is an intensity to your desire. It feels really important. There is an urgency, okay. No surprise there. Urgency and urge, how the two words are connected. It feels like the object of your desire is something that needs immediate attention, and need is a really important word for you to pay attention to.

Whenever you find yourself thinking, I really need this drink, I need a break, usually there is an intensity behind that. It is not a calm energy. It feels really important and like it has to be dealt with right away. So, we can experience our desire in a calm way and we can also experience our desire

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in an intense way, and of course, in between, right? There is an entire spectrum, but then the question that people ask me is okay, so why do some of my desires feel calm, why do they feel like just little, little kind of inklings of what I would like to do and others feel so intense, and for a lot of people that urge to drink, that desire to drink is one of those desires that feels very intense and the answer has to do with everything about the reward that your brain is getting.

So, at a very base level, your brain has a simple goal. It wants to seek pleasure and avoid pain and to do these things as efficiently as possible and wants to expend the least amount of energy as possible. Your brain wants to seek out rewards and avoid pain. Our brain places a priority on things that reward us. Now, I want you to think about all of the things that you can desire, you can desire food and money and sex and nature and time alone and clothing and Facebook and also alcohol. There are lots of things that you can desire, more than what I just listed, and all of these things will produce varying levels of a reward in your brain. So, the reward for going on a walk in your brain is not going to be as great as a reward for having a glass of wine. You are not going to get as much dopamine in your brain when you go on a walk than when you finish a glass of wine simply because humans developed alcohol to be a concentrated form of reward. Alcohol delivers an influx of dopamine into your brain and that influx is greater than many of your other desires.

Now, I also want you to think about how many times you have given your brain the reward of alcohol? How many times you have done it? I talk a lot about the idea that when we drink more than we want in large part what's going on is that we have created a habit around our drinking. So, think about this, think about in your life how many times you have had a drink with dinner or with friends or after work or at a sporting event or when you go out to a restaurant or when you are celebrating. We do this and we do this over and over and over again, and we are not even realizing that we are creating a habit. We are not even realizing that our brain has come to expect to be rewarded with an influx of dopamine at a certain time of day, at certain events, when we see certain people. We are not even aware that we are doing this, but we are unconsciously conditioning our brains to expect a reward at certain times and if you decide that you want to take a break from drinking or if you decide that you want to cut back and you deny yourself the reward that alcohol brings, you will have a strong desire to go get it. You will have an urge.

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Now, that's not the only reason that I think the desire to drink can feel so strong for so many people. Part of it is, yes, alcohol delivers a bigger reward than many other things that we desire. It's a concentrated reward, but your brain isn't just getting this influx of dopamine from consuming alcohol, right? For many people who drink, your brain is actually getting a second equally powerful reward, but a reward that we don't often think about and that is reward of dulling or getting rid of a negative emotion. It is the reward of how alcohol can change our emotional state. So, people will say, you know, like I drink because I want to loosen up, I want to relax, I want to have fun, I want to cut loose, I want to unwind, I want to feel confident, I want to feel attractive, I want to feel less lonely. Whatever it is, we often think of our drinking in the terms of the up side that alcohol is giving us and what happens is that when we just focus on the up side, we often miss what's on the other side.

We miss that what we are trying to move away from is a negative emotion that we are feeling in the moment before we were drinking. We are trying to get rid of feeling insecure or anxious or stressed out or bored or lonely. We miss that piece that we are drinking often to change our feeling state and part of that is the way in which alcohol can cover up how we are feeling and for most of us, we do this completely unconsciously, but even though, it is unconscious, we are still teaching our brain the same lesson that you can dull or cover up or get rid of a negative emotion when you drink and that is a reward in and of itself. So, there are two rewards. There is that reward that you get, that everyone gets when they drink, that influx of dopamine, but for many people who get into the habit of turning to alcohol as a quick and easy way to feel better, to relax, to cut loose, to unwind, to feel confident, whatever it is, what we are also doing at the same time is getting the reward of teaching ourself that we can dull a negative emotion when we drink.

So, here is the thing. The urge to drink is completely harmless. It cannot harm you. You have just trained your brain to want the reward that alcohol gives you, the dopamine reward and the reward of getting rid of a negative emotion, you have just trained your brain to want that reward in certain situations. You weren't born with this desire. You were not born with the desire to drink. It is not a need. It was not programmed in, right? It was something that you learned and you learned it through repetition. You learned it through unconsciously repeating this over and over and over again and never realizing that you were creating a habit.

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The only way your desire can be harmful is if you obey that desire over and over and over again and a lot of people feel like they don't know how not to obey that desire, they only know how to resist it. A lot of you don't know what to do when that desire appears. So, here's the problem. Most people think that if they cut back or take a break from drinking, they shouldn't have any urges at all, that they should just be able to snap their fingers and decide that they aren't going to drink and they are going to take a break, whatever it is, and they should not have any problem, and the reason so many people think of this is because as a society, we have really been conditioned to believe that any sign of struggle when you are trying to cut back or when you are taking a break means that you have a problem, right?

We have this very black and white narrative that I have talked about before and because the narrative is so black and white, and it is either you can control yourself or you can't, your brain can handle it or it can't, right? You have a problem or you don't because it's so black and white. Most people don't want to have any acknowledgement that they have any sign of struggle at all because they are afraid of what that struggle means. So, we go into this, we go into our breaks, we go into cutting back thinking that we shouldn't have any urges. So, that's the first problem.

The second problem is that no one has ever taught you what to do with an urge when it appears. No one ever shows us what to do with it. First of all, we are not expecting it, and then, we don't know what to do when it appears, and most of us, will just try to resist it, will try to push it away, will try to use will power, but the urge will keep appearing and will keep resisting and will feel like we are doing something wrong. We don't understand why this cycle is continuing, and the reason you don't understand is only because no one has ever showed you what you can do with an urge.

When an urge appears, there are several things that you can do and some are more helpful than others. So, there are four things that you can do when an urge appears, and this applies to all urges, not just the urge to drink, and those four things are you can react, you can resist, you can distract, or you can observe, and I am going to explain to you what all of these look like. So, you probably have had experience reacting, right? You have the thought, I want to have a drink, your desire bubbles up and then you go get the drink. You go get the reward, and if you repeat that enough,

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you start to reinforce the cycle. You start to build the habit. So, simply reaction is just feeling desire and then going and getting what you want. It is opening a bottle of wine or ordering a cocktail or heading to the bar, that's reacting and that's what so many of us have done. Many of us for years, thousands of times, we have reacted, and that's why, we have the habit and why we have the habit in certain situations.

You can also resist when the urge to drink appears. So, you can have the thought come up, Oh, I want to have a drink, you are feeling the desire, and then, you can say, no. You can resist. You can fight it. You can tell yourself, I am not going to give in, and for a lot of people, it feels like a war, right? It feels very tense because there is a part of you that wants it and there is a part of you that is trying really hard to resist it and will power can work. You can say no to your desire over and over again. You can do that, but here's the problem. Most people find it exhausting and the reason why most people find it exhausting is what is happening in their body.

So, if you pay attention to what is happening in your body when you are using will power with all your might, you will see that your body is really tense and constricted, and your breathing is shallow, and you might notice yourself sort of gripping or clutching. This is what white-knuckling is. When people talk about white-knuckling through their desire. This is what it looks like, it's that sort of very tense resistance going on, and that's in part why it feels so exhausting because an urge is appearing, and you are just using all your mental strength, all your fortitude and energy to resist it.

So, a lot of people are familiar with that. They are familiar with will power as the way to cut back or to take a break from drinking and what I am suggesting is that there are other things that you can do. So, the third thing that a lot of people will turn to and most people will turn to this very unconsciously. They may not even be aware of it. When the urge appears, when they think the thought I would like a drink and the desire appears, they might decide to try to distract themselves or think of something else, and so, this looks like, you know, turning on the TV, eating something sweet, trying to keep yourself busy. It might look like removing yourself from a situation where people are drinking or deciding that you are not going to go out if you know that alcohol is going to be there, it's the sense of, okay, I am just going to keep myself either as far away or my brain is occupied with something else, so I don't have to think about it.

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Now, a lot of people will do this, and they will start doing this lots of times not even realizing it the sense of, okay, well, I am just going to eat something, or I am just going to have something to occupy my hands, or I am going to turn on the TV, whatever it is. I don't think that there is anything wrong with distraction and a lot of people may find in the beginning, especially when they have not practiced of how to handle the urges in different ways, they may find the distraction is helpful. The only problem I see with distraction is that it's not a very good long-term solution. Most people get to a point where they don't want to entirely remove themselves from being around alcohol. They might have friends that drink. They might want to go out to dinner. They still might want to go out to bars, or they might want to go to a sporting event. It's pretty hard to completely remove yourself from ever being around alcohol, but if distraction is your option of choice when the urge appears, then you are not going to get a sense of, okay, so what do I do, how do I handle it other than keeping my brain busy with something else.

So the fourth option you have is to observe an urge. You can have the thought, I would like a drink, I want to drink, I need a drink. You can have the desire appear, the urge appear and you can tell yourself, everything is fine, nothing has gone wrong. You can really welcome that urge, like, oh, hello, it's you again. Of course, you are here because it's 7 o'clock and I just got home from work and I am used to pouring myself a glass of wine when I get home from work and I am not doing that. So, of course, that urge is here. I trained you to be here. I didn't know I was doing it, but I did. This was supposed to happen.

Now, that is a totally different energy than resisting. Instead of saying, you know, I am pushing it away and I wish it wasn't here and I am not going to give in, right? This is a really strong energy. That's totally different from what I am talking about which is expecting that the urge is going to be there and welcoming it, saying like, yeah, hi. This makes perfect sense that you are here, and I am okay with an urge being here. When you shift to this option, when you feel the urge in your body, and you are not judging it, you are not resisting it, you are not trying to cover it up or distract yourself, you are just trying to notice, that is where all your power comes back because so many of us feel like we are at the mercy of our urges. We feel like, I couldn't resist it. It was just too strong and what I want to offer to you is that when you are able to look at it, when you are able to welcome it, when you are able to see the urge and not judge it and not make it mean anything,

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you can notice it for what it is, and most people will describe an urge as this. They will describe it as sort of a sense of rushing or an immediacy that they feel in their body. Some people might even liken it to almost like adrenaline, right? It's the sense of fastness.

People will talk about speed a lot with urges, but if you are able to be aware of that and also breathe, right, take a couple of deep breaths, don't be afraid of the urge and just try to sit with it, you realize that you are not at the mercy of an urge, you can be with an urge, you can sit with it, you can watch it and it will eventually go away on its own. Now, this takes practice because most of us do not have the experience of doing this. We have the experience of reacting, resisting or distracting. So, it will take practice for you to realize that you can observe, you can welcome it. You can expect that it will come and when it comes, it doesn't mean anything has gone wrong and you can notice what it feels like. you are not at the mercy of an urge to drink. You always have free will.

People really don't like observing their urges because they usually have this belief that something has gone wrong that it is a problem. If they feel an urge, it's a sign of something bad, but nothing has gone wrong. Your urge to drink is supposed to be there. You created that habit, you didn't know it, but you did. You created the habit by routinely drinking when you went out to dinner or when you were going to bars, when you were at restaurants, and also when you were feeling certain emotions, when you were feeling anxious or stressed out or insecure or lonely, you repeated that enough times and you started to create a habit and that's all the urge is there to tell you that you have created something that has become unconscious and the way you will bring it back, the way you will be able to undo that habit, is to bring consciousness back to the habit, and you do that first by observing the urge.

Now, I like to talk about it this way is that, you know, the idea that you can't change something unless you are willing to look at it. So, if we take it outside of the realm of drinking, we think about the idea of debt, right? You may have been in this position or you might know someone they are in a lot of debt, and sometimes, they won't even know how much. They will just have a rough ballpark estimate, that's how much they don't want to look at it and what are your options in that moment. What are the options when you owe \$20,000 on your credit card. You can keep spending, right? You can keep using that credit card. You can wish that it would go away. You

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can think this is unfair and how come this is my problem and why am I in so much debt. You can also never open your bills, you can pretend it's not there, you cannot tally up your balance. You can focus on everything else and tell yourself you will deal with it later or you can open up the bill, you can look at your credit card statement, you can log into the bank account online, and you can see what's going on and figure out a way forward.

The only way that you really can start to change is if you are willing to look at it, and for so many people they are not willing to look at that urge to drink, they just want it to go away because they are so sure that it means something wrong. It doesn't mean anything has gone wrong. If you have created a habit, there is a reason why you have an urge. Your urge will pass. It will. It cannot last forever, but you have probably been so busy reacting or resisting or distracting that you have never given yourself the opportunity to watch it pass because the only way to have that opportunity is to be open to it.

Okay, so what do you do when the urge to drink appears? The very first thing you have to do is figure out what option you are in. Are you reacting, are you resisting, are you distracting, or are you trying to observe, and trying to observe is going to be the work that is going to move you forward. It is going to feel awkward and it is going to feel a little uncomfortable probably, you are going to not be sure if you doing it right, but I will tell you that it's just a skill you need to consciously practice and consciously build and you can do that by telling yourself that nothing has gone wrong. You can do that by welcoming the urge.

You may have created this habit unknowingly, but you can undo this habit, but if you created it unknowingly, the way to undo it is to bring consciousness to it. The urge to drink does not have power over you. You are not at the mercy of it. You just haven't practiced different ways of dealing with it. You have been very practiced probably if you have done this work on your own at resisting or distracting, but that doesn't really lets you look at it. It doesn't let you feel like you are not at the mercy of it. It tells you you have to push it away or you have to cover it up, but you don't have to do either of those things.

You can just notice how the urge feels in your body, you can try to describe it, and you can know that an urge to drink is perfectly normal and once you are able to do that, you can also start to ask yourself, okay, what makes the

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sensations in my body that accompany an urge to drink so unpleasant that I would rather react, resist, or distract. Can I just be with it? Can I put faith in the idea that it will pass?

Alright, so, just a recap on today's episode. Urges are part of the emotion of desire, and our desire, we can feel it calmly or we can feel it intensely or everything in between and if you are feeling it intensely, one of the things you have to pay attention to, is the reward associated with the object of your desire and for many people, that reward is twofold. It is both the influx of dopamine you get when you have a drink, but it is also the knowledge that having a drink can change how you feel. It is a quick and easy fix to change your emotional state and for many people they unknowingly get in the habit of drinking to get rid of negative emotions.

The other piece to remember is that when an urge appears, nothing has gone wrong. You are supposed to have urges. If you have been in the habit of drinking, and now, you want to cut back or take a break, you are going to have urges. That is normal. The only problem is that no one showed you what to do with them. You have probably spent a lot of time reacting or resisting and may be even distracting, but what I want you to think about today is what you can do to observe. What you can do to be perfectly fine and not judge the urge and even welcome it because that is the moment when you can start to change it. That is the moment when you can start to have authority over the urge to drink instead of feeling like you are at the mercy of it.

So, that's it for today everyone. Let me know what you think or if you have any questions, I love hearing from my listeners, and you can always email me at podcast@rachelhart.com, and to celebrate the launch of this show and to thank you all for listening, I am going to be giving away 10 copies of my e-book "Why Can't I Drink Like Everyone Else?" All you have to do is leave a review on iTunes and then head on over to my website www.rachelhart.com/iTunes and let me know the title of your review, and you will be entered to win and thanks everybody for listening. I will see you next week.

Okay, listen up, changing your drinking is so much easier than you think. Whether you want to drink less or not at all, you don't need more rules or willpower. You need a logical framework that helps you understand and, more importantly, change the habit from the inside out. It starts with my 30-

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day challenge. Besides the obvious health benefits, taking a break from drinking is the fastest way to figure out what's really behind your desire. This radically different approach helps you succeed by dropping the perfectionism and judgment that blocks change. Decide what works best for you when it comes to drinking. Discover how to trust yourself and feel truly powered to take it or leave it. Head on over to RachelHart.com/join and start your transformation today.