

Ep #16: The Power of Doing Hard Things



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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 16.

Whether you want to drink less or stop drinking, this podcast will help you change the habit from the inside out. We're challenging conventional wisdom about why people drink and why it can be hard to resist temptation. No labels, no judgment, just practical tools to take control of your desire and stop worrying about your drinking. Now, here's your host Rachel Hart.

Hello friends, how are you? What are you up to? What are you reading right now? I will tell you, I just finished a New Yorker article, it was a truly strange article. I was about the Victorian obsession with polar exploration. If you're interested, I recommend Googling it, it's kind of weird. It's called Polar Expressed, so if you don't get the magazine, you can read it online. But it talks about the public fascination with exploration to the North and the South Pole and how it was so widespread and in the consciousness of the general public during the Victorian age that people were writing songs about it and they were attending polar themed dinner parties, which I don't know what that is, but I would like to attend one of those, and that the literature of the time had a whole genre all about polar exploration and going to the North Pole.

It's a totally strange article, but anyway, I wanted to share it with you because when I was reading it, in the article they were talking about Arthur Conan Doyle. So if you don't know who that is, he is the author of the Sherlock Holmes series and they talk about how before he became a writer, when he was a young man, he actually served on a ship, I think it was called Hope, that sailed from Scotland to the Arctic.

So apparently, he did this and it was like a couple month journey I think, I'm actually not sure how long it was, but apparently, for the rest of his life he would tell anyone and everyone who would listen about this voyage to the Arctic and how being on that ship was the best thing that ever happened to him and he attributed that time of the ship as contributing to his literary

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success but also to his longevity and his health in life. So he really thought that this trip was the best thing.

Now, here's the thing, here's why I wanted to share it with you. In the article, they talk about the fact that Arthur kept a diary, a very detailed diary while he was aboard the ship and he was heading to the Arctic and his diary entries are really kind of rough. So everyday, he's writing about what's happening on the ship and how he's doing in his mental state and each day it keeps getting worse, so on May 11th, he writes, "misery and desolation" and then a couple weeks later he writes, "worse and worserer" and I don't even know if that's a word, and then on June 2nd he says, "my hair is coming out and I'm getting prematurely aged" and then June 13th, "it would make a saint swear", and by July he's saying, "I got up late, I would have liked to have gotten up later, which is a sad moral state to be in."

So he's writing in his diary everyday during the trip, we can look at his diary today and he's talking continually about how he's kind of bored, he has all this anxiety that the ship is going to get trapped in an ice pack and then they're going to be stuck, he has all this fear that he is going to fall into the water and basically, he just keeps talking about how unhappy he is.

Yet, for the rest of his life, you couldn't shut this guy up about how wonderful and impactful his trip was on his life and he attributed that trip in his 20s going to the Arctic as having all these really, really positive benefits for him with his literary career, with his health. It's so funny and it made me think about something that I have been wanting to talk to all of you about, which is the power of doing hard things. I didn't think that I was going to get to this topic based on the Victorian obsession with polar exploration, but here we are.

Okay, so if you are listening, it's probably because you are contemplating either taking a break from drinking or cutting back, and my guess is that you don't think that it will be a piece of cake. If it was a piece of cake, you probably would have done so already and you wouldn't be listening to a podcast. But your probably thinking was this is going to be a lot of struggle, it's going to be really difficult, it's going to be uncomfortable, maybe it will

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be even a little embarrassing and it's sure not going to be fun and it will probably be boring and I'll have to tell everyone or talk to people about it. This just doesn't sound very good.

And this is what is so challenging when we want to change a habit, right? We look into the future and we see all these ways of like, this just doesn't particularly look like it's going to be a very enjoyable time, and then we have to get into a place of convincing ourselves to do something that's going to be hard.

Now, I'm not going to tell you that changing your drinking is going to be a piece of cake. It's not true, it's going to be challenging, it is going to be difficult, is it going to take effort. But what I want to explain to you is why it is challenging to get yourself to do hard things and also the real benefit and real power behind deciding to do hard things.

So the main problem that we all face is the process of how our brain evolved. Our brain is actually designed to avoid hard things. I've talked about this before in the podcast but what we are innately motivated to do is very simple: seek pleasure, avoid pain and do both of these things while expending the least amount of energy possible.

This is basically our motivational triad that explains how we survived, and it makes a lot of sense. It makes, actually, incredible sense when you think about humans thousands of years ago in a world full of danger, when you didn't know when your next meal was coming or where it was coming from, when shelter and basic necessities for life weren't a given, when violence was around every corner, there were hard things all over our environment.

Just existing, just living was hard, surviving was hard. And so looking for easy solutions, looking for ways to seek pleasure and avoid pain by using the least amount of energy as possible so the easiest way to do it, that was a smart thing to do. That helped us survive. That was a really beneficial way that our brain evolved to look for easy things to do. It makes a lot of sense when you're doing hard stuff all the time, just to survive.

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Now here's the problem: in today's world, if you are listening to this, most of us do not have to do that many hard things in order to survive, right? I certainly did not have to do and have not had to do a lot of hard, really difficult things in order to survive. Food has been pretty easy to get, clean water is as simple as turning on the tap, shelter has never been a question for me. I'm not always facing a world in which violence is always coming round the corner.

And you know what? My brain is kind of happy that I don't have to do difficult things to survive. It likes not spending a lot of energy and when you have to do difficult things to survive, you have to expend a lot of energy. My brain likes to save energy because that's what has essentially allowed humans to survive. It was saving energy, expending the least amount of energy and moving towards pleasure and moving away from pain. That allowed for survival.

But we're in a very different world than we were thousands of years ago, when we don't have to do a lot of us, very difficult things in order to survive. So then choosing something difficult to do like changing a habit, changing any habit is going to require energy and changing the habit of drinking will be a difficult thing to do. It will require awareness and energy and doing things that make you feel kind of uncomfortable. That is actually kind of going against the grain of evolution. It does not come naturally for most of us and this is also part of why drinking can so easily become a habit, because also, our brain wants to seek pleasure. It wants easy pleasure.

So drinking, I've talked about this before, it is the quickest and easiest fix to feel differently and for a lot of us, not only are we getting the reward of pleasure, not only are we getting the influx of dopamine, but drinking is also solving a difficulty for us. It is solving how we don't want to feel in this moment. It is solving our desire not to feel stressed or anxious or uncomfortable or bored or lonely. Whatever it is, it's also solving a problem. Your brain wants instant gratification, but not only that, it wants easy instant gratification and then easy instant gratification that solves a problem? Well, that's just like hitting the jackpot.

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The problem is, if you keep going towards that easy instant gratification and that easy instant gratification to solve a problem, to take care of a difficulty, a difficulty that your brain already doesn't want to deal with, it doesn't want to do the hard things, it wants to do the easy things, sooner or later, you're going to find that you will have created a habit.

What this means when you want to take a break from drinking or you want to cut back is that you have to purposely choose to do the hard thing. You have to purposely choose to move towards something that is difficult, and basically no one wants to do this. I know I certainly did it. That was a big thing that held me back for a long time. Just thinking about "this is too hard, it's going to be too hard, I know I'm unhappy right now, but this looks like a ton of work."

And it's not because I was lazy, it's not because something was wrong with me, it's because doing the hard thing went against my brain's most basic instinct to have things be easy. So if you're going to choose to do something hard, there has to be a reason. There has to be some sort of power in doing the hard thing, there has to be some sort of long-term benefit that will sustain you well after you've done that hard thing. Otherwise, you'll look at that hard thing and kind of think, "What's the point? I like it easy. My brain likes it easy. Easy is comfortable. Easy is what I'm designed to do, let's just have everything be easy."

So it brings me back to Arthur, who was so unhappy on that ship, right? You look at his diary entries everyday and he was talking about his fear and his anxiety and his boredom and this guy was afraid that the ship was going to get stuck in an ice pack, right? Like that's a hard thing to get out of. But afterwards when he got back and then throughout his life, he couldn't stop talking about how great this voyage was. He couldn't stop talking about how it had set him up for so many things, including becoming a great writer.

He found something really powerful in doing something that at the time you can read in his diary was really, really hard for him. So here's the power in doing hard things. It's not only the power that you have to decide to do it.

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You have to go against evolution, you have to go against how your brain was designed, you have to go against this desire for easy, instant gratification that solves a problem, you have to make that decision.

But the power is really in what is revealed to you about yourself when you do it. Hard things force you to grow, hard things force you to evolve, hard things force you to stretch beyond what you think you're capable of. Hard things force you to become something greater and more and bigger than who you were before you did that hard thing, because you have to stretch, because you have to push yourself, because you have to step outside of what is comfortable for you right now and do things differently.

So I think about this all the time in my own personal experience with drinking and how it wasn't for me just not drinking that made me grow, because actually, I talk about this, I had flip flopped many times in my 20s. I had even given up drinking for a whole year when I was 22, and the growth for me really was not in that. It was not in the just repetitive saying no over and over and over again, and in fact, I found that experience kind of miserable.

What changed for me is when I decided to do the challenging thing, when I decided to do the difficult thing but what I also decided was that I was going to learn how not to need alcohol to change how I felt, to not to need a drink to feel better, to not need alcohol as a crutch to feel confident, to feel attractive, to feel outgoing, to fit in, to not need it to get rid of my anxiety and to learn other new much more sustainable ways to feel confident, to feel attractive, to feel outgoing, to feel calm, to feel self-possessed.

And that was what was so powerful for me, and I will tell you, I wouldn't trade that experience for a second because I am someone who is different on the other side of it. I was forced to grow, I was forced to stretch in ways that I didn't even think at the time were really possible. And I'll tell you that I also don't regret all the years that I was drinking and it was really a struggle for me and it was causing a lot of headaches and it was something that I spent so much time worrying about and thinking about and beating myself up over. I wouldn't trade in that time either because I needed that period. I

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needed that in order to become this next version of myself. I need that in order to grow.

Drinking for me, and I'm sure for you, is comfortable, it's easy. You don't have to grow, you don't have to stretch. You don't have to do anything really, at all, to feel different other than pour yourself a glass. It's simple, it's easy, it gives you immediate pleasure, instant gratification, and not only that, it moves you away from pain and it does this with almost expending no energy. I mean, think about the energy your brain has to expend to get a drink. It's very little. It's especially very little if you have a bottle of wine in your kitchen or if you just walk up to a bar, or if you ask a waiter for a drink. That's very little energy that you're expending.

So yes, for me, drinking was causing me a lot of headaches and there were tons and tons of repercussions and as it continued, as I got older, the repercussions started to mount. But my brain was on the path of least resistance, and sometimes our brains will choose something easy at our own expense, and that's what I was doing. I was choosing something easy at my own expense and the more comfortable my brain was at relying on alcohol as a way to feel differently and to feel better, and also just a way to feel good, to get pleasure in my life, the more I stagnated, the more I didn't grow, the more I didn't evolve because I wasn't expending any energy to. I was just doing the same thing over and over.

I think about it sometimes and I really had the hang-ups and the fears and the awkwardness of a 17-year-old girl really locked inside the mind of a woman in her 30s, because I wasn't making any progress in any of it. I wasn't making any progress in feeling less awkward or feeling less uncomfortable or feeling less anxious. All those same negative feelings that I had when I was 17 and I started drinking, guess what? They were still there. They hadn't really budged. I hadn't made progress because I kept turning to the same solution.

I kept feeling awkward or feeling uncomfortable and deciding I would have a drink. It was easy, it was pleasurable, it helped me avoid pain. It took almost no energy, but it was stunting my growth and making me feel

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miserable at the same time, and that piece about stunting my growth, that was the piece that took me the longest to understand. I didn't understand how it wasn't just that I was choosing pleasure, it wasn't just that I was in a habit. It's that I was actually stunting my own development and my own evolution as a person.

Choosing the easiest thing kept humans alive back in the day when we were faced with having to do hard things and difficult things all day long just to survive. We were expending all this energy just to get food, just to get shelter, just to be safe, and so choosing the path of least resistance made sense. It made a lot of sense, but now, most of us are in a situation where we're actually expending very little energy to survive, very little energy to get food, to get clean water, to get shelter, to be safe. But our brain is still choosing the easy way forward.

We're caught up in seeking comfort over and over and it's never occurring to us that we should even have to do the hard thing because our brain is programmed not to want to do the hard thing because it thinks doing the easy thing is how we survive.

Now, here's the crazy thing: not only are we choosing the easy thing to do, but by using a drink as a quick and easy fix to feel better, we start to tell ourselves that without that fix, we'll be unhappy, we won't have fun, we'll be missing out, life will be boring. So not only are we choosing the easy thing, but then we turn around and we kind of don't like the fact that we're relying on a drink as our go-to way to feel good, our go-to way to have fun, our go-to way not to be bored or to get through that party to make these people more interesting, so of course we don't want to take it away.

I was talking with a client yesterday who really wants to change her drinking and she was telling me that she is so sick of where she is and she wants to take a break but the idea is intimidating because she's afraid that she might fail, and what I told her was this: you get to define what success and failure look like for you. And my definition of success is not and has never been that I will never have a drink again. That is not my definition of success because I took a break. I took a break for an entire year, I did that,

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I didn't have a drink, I said no, and I was miserable and I felt like I was missing out the entire time. I hated it, it sucked. I enjoyed not having hangovers, I enjoyed not having to wake up the next day and wondering what I did or said last night, but the rest of it wasn't that much fun. I didn't particularly enjoy it.

And so not drinking is not the metric of my success that I choose. My metric of success is not I'll stop drinking for 30 days or 90 days or 6 months or a year or for the rest of my life. Who cares? That's what I think. Who cares if I do that? Because I could do that and just say no and not learn any of this work, not do any of these tools, not understand how to change my desire, not understand that my thoughts create my feeling, not understand or know how to help myself feel better right now without relying on anything external outside of me. I don't want that metric of not drinking.

What I want is can I learn how to stop relying on alcohol? Can I learn how to not need a quick and easy fix to feel better because I'm capable of making myself feel better? Can I feel better on my own? Can I learn how to change my desire so I don't feel like I'm missing out? But I actually feel like I don't want it, my desire is different. That was my metric of success.

And that's what I said to her when she was really feeling, well, I don't know, what if I fail? Right? You get to define what your metric for success and failure look like, and if I had a drink tomorrow, I wouldn't decide that I had been a failure, that I had failed, because that's not the metric that I use.

But all of this work, it takes being uncomfortable, it takes choosing the hard thing. You have to do what is difficult and go against your brain's instinct for everything to be easy, but it's so worth it. It's really hard to explain this to someone who has never experienced being pulled to drink more than they want to, feeling more desire than they want to have, feeling like drinking often feels like this insatiable thing that they don't have full control over, but if you feel like that, then you will understand that to be free of your desire, to feel like you have control, to feel like you are not being pulled in this direction that you don't want to go, that is the best feeling in the world, and that is the power of doing hard things.

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That is something that you have to choose to work on and practice. It will go against what your brain wants, it will be uncomfortable, it will require effort, but you will look back on it the same way that I do and the same way that Arthur did about his trip to the Arctic and you will think wow, that thing, that difficult thing that I did that was uncomfortable and I struggled through and I had to deal with all these difficult feelings and situations, that was the best decision I ever made.

And not just because you won't have to spend all this time thinking about your drinking or worrying about your drinking or worrying what you did last night, but because you will grow as a person. You will become someone that you weren't before you started. That is the power of doing hard things. You discover a whole new you.

Alright, so before I go, I want to share with you a new free resource that I put together. If you are struggling to change your drinking, I created a work sheet, it's called Your Complete Picture, that I promise will completely change your perspective. I always tell people, if you only ever do one exercise about your drinking, do this one. It is that powerful. It is the exercise that changed everything for me. If you want to go grab it, all you need to do is go to www.rachelhart.com/picture and download it now.

That's it for this week, keep on sending me your emails, your questions, comments, whatever, send it to podast@rachelhart.com, and I hope everybody has a great week. I will see you on the next episode.

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

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truly powered to take it or leave it. Head on over to RachelHart.com/join and start your transformation today.