

Ep #17: Understanding Your Thoughts



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Rachel Hart

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #17: Understanding Your Thoughts

You are listening to the *Take a Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, episode 17.

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 everybody, how are you? What are you up to? What are you doing? I just got back a weeklong trip back East, I was there seeing my family and my friends, I did a little circuit of New England, I started in Boston to see my sister and my niece and my sister in law, then we drove to Connecticut so I could see my parents and my grandmother who is turning 95 this year and is amazing, I love her. And then I finished up the trip by driving to Montpelier in Vermont and seeing two of my dearest friends in the world. I love, love, love Vermont. It's one of my favorite places and this is one of my favorite times of year in New England because spring had just arrived, the sap is rising, the hills are starting to turn that bright green color, and I don't know, there's nothing like spring in New England to me. But I'm back in San Francisco and it's lovely here today, but it's just not New England. So for those of you who are lucky enough to live there, just know I'm very jealous.

Okay, so today we are talking about the think-feel-act cycle. I've introduced this concept before and I go into lots of detail about it in my book, *Why Can't I Drink Like Everyone Else?* I talk about its origins, how the cycle works, how to apply it, but today we're going to have a little bit of a primer and here's why: learning about the think-feel-act cycle was the key. It was so key when it came for me to understand why I was drinking too much, why I relied on alcohol in certain situations, and how to unlearn my desire. That was huge.

You can decide not to drink and I did, many times. I took many, many breaks from drinking but making that decision does not change your desire. If you want to change your desire, you have to understand the think-feel-act

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #17: Understanding Your Thoughts

cycle. Not only that, but this model became my framework for understanding myself in the world. I talk about it all the time as a meta skill.

So you might learn this model, you might learn how to apply it in relation to your drinking, but here's the thing: once you learn it, once you understand how it works, once you see it in action and learn how to harness it, it becomes a meta skill, and what I mean by that is that once you have it down, you can apply it to anything you want to change in your life.

Okay, so over the next couple of episodes, I'm going to talk all about this cycle. I'm going to teach you how to tell the difference between the different parts, between thinking, feeling and acting. I'm going to show you how to bring more awareness into your life so that you can actually see the cycle in action, and I'm also going to explain why this isn't just an interesting concept, because if it was just an interesting concept, well, it wouldn't explain why all of the results you have in your life, including drinking too much, why you have those results.

So today we're starting with thoughts. Alright, what do I mean when I say a thought? It sounds really obvious but people actually have very different ideas about what your thoughts are. This is the way I think about it: any language that goes through your head is a thought. So you can think of it as a sentence in your mind, that's what a thought is. Now, there are a lot of different metaphors that you can use to imagine what your thoughts are but one of my favorite ones, and it's probably because I spent a long time living in New York City, one of my favorite ones is the idea that your thoughts are like an electronic news ticker.

So I want you to imagine the news ticker in Times Square, that scrolling ticker that's constantly circulating the headlines of the day. You can imagine that the thoughts in your mind are just like that ticker. There is a constant stream of thoughts that are running through your head. Okay, so why is this metaphor useful? It's useful because first and foremost, the most important skill you need to have in order to harness the think-feel-act cycle is to practice making a distinction between your thoughts that you're

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #17: Understanding Your Thoughts

thinking and the part of you that can observe the thoughts that you're thinking, okay?

This is a key thing. Understanding the distinction between the thoughts that you're thinking and your ability or that part of you to observe those thoughts. So if you're familiar at all with meditation, it's sometimes called The Watcher or The Observer. That's how they'll reference this part of you that can watch your thinking. You might also think of it as your consciousness, your ability to think about your thoughts.

But here's the thing, the point of this, the point of making this distinction is that if you can observe your thoughts, if you can think about your thinking, then you and your thoughts are not one in the same. You are not your thoughts, and in a minute I'm going to explain why this is so important, but most of us really have never considered this before, the idea that because there's a part of us that can watch how we think, that can observe how we think, it means there's a part of us that is separate from how we think, and that is so key.

So think of it, you're got this electronic news ticker in your mind and everyday on the ticker you're thinking tens of thousands of thoughts. Not only are you noticing what's around you, not only are you noticing what's happening in the world, but you're also making assessments about all of these things. You are assessing with your thoughts yourself, your body, your job, your family, your partner, your kids, the weather, the traffic, the girl at the checkout, you name it, you are assessing all of these things.

So your mind is not just noticing the world around you, it's making judgments about that world. I want you to think of it this way: think about when you look at yourself in the mirror. When that happens, when you stand in front of your mirror at home, you are not just thinking to yourself, that's me, that's my reflection. You are assessing your reflection. You look in the mirror and you might think something along the lines of, my hair looks weird, my skin looks terrible today, I've got bags under my eyes, whatever it is. So you're not just noticing that that is you in the mirror,

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #17: Understanding Your Thoughts

you're not just saying hey, that's my reflection. You are assessing your reflection.

So we do this with everything around us, and I'll tell you that most of us have gotten so used to the steady stream of judgments that we're always making and judgments that are always running through our minds that the truth is, we don't really pay attention to the fact that we're making judgments at all. Sometimes, and actually often, we don't even notice that they're there. These judgments, they really just become the background noise of our life.

So one way to think about it is you've ever decided that you were going to pick up your house, clean up, and you turn on the TV and have it going on in the background, so the TV's on, and you might kind of half be listening to the TV while you're cleaning up but after a while, you might not even notice that it's turned on at all. It's like a TV is on in the background that we're not paying attention to.

This is exactly what it's like with this news ticker of thoughts and judgments and assessments that we're having all day long. But if you're going to harness the think-feel-act cycle to change your drinking, you have to change this. You have to become aware. So first, to harness that cycle you need to bring awareness to your thoughts. You need to notice that electronic news ticker in your mind; you need to pay attention to it. It can't just be something in the background, it has to be something that you notice and you tune into.

Second, you have to recognize that you are not your thoughts. You can observe your thoughts, if you can think about your thinking, it means that you are separate from your thoughts and if you're separate from your thoughts, then you and your thoughts are not one in the same. This is so key. If you're not one in the same with your thoughts, then you can change them. If your thoughts are you, if you can't observe them, you can't watch them, if you can't look at them, there's no way you can change them. But you can change them. But it starts with recognizing that you are not the same as your thinking.

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #17: Understanding Your Thoughts

And then third, if you want to start to harness the think-feel-act cycle, you need to start to notice all the judging and assessing. You are not just looking in the mirror and saying to yourself, hey, that's me, that's my reflection. You're having an opinion, you are assessing everything.

So your thoughts are what start the think-feel-act cycle. You don't ever feel an emotion and that includes the desire to drink, without first thinking a thought. But most of us don't really pay attention to our thinking and don't understand that our thinking is creating our emotions or understand that our thinking is creating our desire. Paying attention is what allows us to not just notice why we feel the way we do, but to really begin the work of understanding that our emotions, including desire are things that can be changed.

I'm going to tell you that really just the act of bringing awareness to your thinking, bringing awareness to your thoughts can actually be challenging for some people, and if you've ever thought to yourself, you know what, I don't really like being alone with my thoughts, you'll understand why.

So some of the people that I will work with, and I will tell you that when I first started to do this work as well, when I started to tune into my thoughts, I hated doing it and the reason why was because I didn't like what I heard. I didn't like looking at my thinking because you know what, there was a lot of negative thinking in there.

But here's the thing, if you are on the same boat, if you don't really like being alone with your thoughts, if you don't like noticing all the negative thoughts that you're thinking, it's okay. All it means is that you're witnessing the think-feel-act cycle. You are watching that cycle unfold, and here's why: if you think a negative thought, you are going to feel a negative emotion, and that's okay. Nothing has gone wrong. When you think negative thoughts, you will feel negative emotions. That's how the cycle works, but most people get stuck here and I want to explain why.

The reason why people get stuck here, the reason why people tune in to their thoughts just for a little bit and then say, I don't want to do that, I don't

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #17: Understanding Your Thoughts

want to look anymore, I don't like the way I feel, I don't like looking at my thinking, I don't like listening to all these negative thoughts, it's because they don't yet realize that they are not their thoughts.

Any negative thought you have, whatever it is, I'm not good enough, I'm a screw up, I never measure up, everyone else has it all figured out, I wish I was prettier or smarter or more successful, whatever the negative thought is, it is not who you are. It is just your thinking, and most of us have no idea that there is a huge difference between the two of these things, but there is.

There is a big difference between who you are and what you're thinking. Any negative thought that you have, any one, is not who you are. It is your judgment; it is your assessment right now. It is that moment when you're looking in the mirror and instead of just objectively assessing what you see, hey that's me, that's my reflection, you start to bring in all your judgment.

Most people do not get this, well, because no one's ever explained it to us. So most of us just assume that our negative thoughts are who we are, we assume that the thoughts, I'm not good enough, I'm a screw up, I never measure up, everyone else has it figured out, I'm not pretty enough, smart enough, successful enough, whatever it is, we assume that these thoughts are true. We assume that these thoughts are us, instead of recognizing that they're judgments.

The fact that you can observe the electronic news ticker in your mind with all those thousands of thoughts going by, the fact that you can observe your thinking, the fact that you can notice its effect on you means that you are not your thinking, and this is the best news ever, because if you are not your thoughts, then you can learn how to change them.

When you believe that your thoughts are who you are, let me tell you, you are going to feel helpless and this is how I felt for a long time, and I think for many of you out there, many of you who are very introspective and really do pay attention to what you're thinking, you pay attention but not in a way that gives you any distance. So think about it: the pages and pages and pages that you write down in your journal, that to you is all just true. That to

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #17: Understanding Your Thoughts

you is all just who you are, and it feels really negative a lot of the time and it can feel very helpless because we think, we convince ourselves that the only way to stop feeling negative is to change who we are. And so we work and work and work to change our bodies, to change our personalities, to change our resume, whatever it is, and when that changing doesn't work, when we try as hard as we can but we're still not happy, then what often happens is we turn to something outside of us that helps us cover up how we feel.

So think about it, when I walked into a party and I thought to myself, I just don't belong here, I don't measure up, I'm so out of my element, I just thought all of that was true. I didn't understand that there was any distance between my thoughts and myself. It was all just true, and when my attempts to become prettier and smarter and more successful didn't make me feel better, well I felt stuck, and I wanted to feel better. I wanted some relief, and the truth is that I knew how to get it. I had learned a long time ago the very best way to change how I felt, and that meant having a drink.

You do that enough times, and guess what? You will create a habit of using alcohol to numb your negative emotions and to change how you feel. The only problem is, it's not very sustainable. You can keep having a drink so that you can feel less awkward, less insecure, less out of your element, but guess what? When you show up to your next party, those feelings haven't gone away because those thoughts haven't changed, and so you keep needing to pour yourself a glass so that you can start to feel better.

And I'll tell you, if you've ever felt bombarded by your thinking, and I know that this is something that is so true for me and a lot of the people that I work with will say that, that they feel kind of bombarded by all the thoughts in their mind; it's only because you believe that your thinking is outside of your control, and the only reason you believe that is because no one has ever shown you the think-feel-act cycle in action. No one has ever shown you how to harness it and how to use it to your advantage, and instead, what happens is that almost all of us assume that the way we think is fixed, that our thoughts are just who we are, they are just a true assessment of

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #17: Understanding Your Thoughts

the world, and we really miss the connection between the way we think, the way we feel and the way we act, and we have no idea how much power we have to actually harness this cycle for good.

So if you find the concept of observing your thoughts challenging, look, all you have to do is something that is called a thought download. All I want you to do is set a timer for five minutes and write down whatever comes into your head. It doesn't have to make sense, it doesn't have to flow in a logical order, just observe what's in your head and get it down on a piece of paper, and when the timer is up, stop writing and look at what you wrote. Those are your thoughts; what's on the piece of paper is that inner monologue that is going on in your mind all the time.

When you get those thoughts on a piece of paper, it's one way to give yourself distance to look at them and also to start the process of questioning them. That will be huge and that's something we're going to talk more about in another episode.

So here's the final point, and this one is essential for you to be able to use the think-feel-act cycle. What you have written down on that piece of paper, whatever your inner monologue is, whatever that electronic news ticker is of yours that's running through your mind, here's the thing: it's not an objective reflection of reality. It's not, and the reason why is because all of those thoughts contain your assessments and your judgments.

An objective reflection of reality would be to look in the mirror and think, oh, that's me, that's my reflection, but that's probably not what is running through your mind. That's probably not what goes through your head when you look at yourself in front of the mirror.

For so many of us, what's running through our minds are thoughts like I look terrible, what's wrong with my hair, I really should just lose 15 pounds, whatever it is, all these judgments and assessments that we have. When you think about the think-feel-act cycle, it really is looking in the mirror and understanding that your reflection never causes a negative emotion. You

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #17: Understanding Your Thoughts

only feel insecure or anxious or awkward when you have a thought that judges or assesses how you look.

The reflection in the mirror doesn't create the way you feel, your thoughts about your reflection create how you feel. And for most of you, those are some pretty negative emotions, but guess what? Those thoughts are not who you really are, they are just thoughts in your mind that you haven't learned to notice and you haven't learned to question until now.

Once you get those thoughts down on paper, once you start to observe your thinking instead of being at the effect of it all the time, you will start to see that your thoughts are changeable, and I'll tell you, this is not something that you have practiced yet. What you have practiced and what all of us spend years practicing are these unconscious thoughts - well, if I think something it must be true, or this is just the way I am, or I can't change how I feel.

We've all unknowingly practiced this belief that it's not our thoughts that create our feelings, right? It's everything around us and our feelings frankly, are not within our control, but they are. The reason why it's so important to really pay attention to the think-feel-act cycle and really start to understand how it works in your life is because it flies in the face of what our society and what our culture conditions us to believe.

We are conditioned to believe that our external environment creates how we feel and it's the exact reason why we spend so much time and energy wishing that our jobs were better, our bodies were thinner, our families were more understanding, our bank accounts were bigger, whatever it is, because we've been taught that these are the things that keep us from being happy. We've been taught that it's not the thoughts that we think, but it's everything we have in life.

So the reason why so many of us spend so much of our time preoccupying ourselves with trying to find the perfect job or losing weight or get our partner to act in a certain way or fantasize about winning the lottery, because we think this is what's going to make us happy, we think that that's

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #17: Understanding Your Thoughts

how we're going to feel better. And when we don't feel better, when we try all of these things and we still have these negative emotions, we still feel lonely or awkward or bored, whatever it is, we often turn to something outside of us to feel better. We do that enough and it becomes a habit.

So this week, I really want you to pay attention to the thoughts that you are thinking, and I want you to remind yourself that they are just sentences in your mind. Get those thoughts on a piece of paper and practice observing them with some distance. Be aware that these thoughts are not who you are, and you know what, if you start to do this regularly, you will notice that you feel a little bit calmer and you have a bit more perspective on life, and it will really open the door to start to examine all the thinking you have about your drinking, all the thinking you have about what change will be like and all the thinking you have that creates your desire. But first, you have to start with really practicing observing and understanding your thoughts.

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 worksheet; 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's 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 rachelhart.com/picture and download it now.

Alright, that's it everybody, thank you so much for listening. I have heard from so many of you in the past couple weeks, I love it. Please keep it up, if you want to email me you can shoot me a note at podcast@rachelhart.com. Otherwise, I will see you on the next episode. Thanks for listening.

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.

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #17: Understanding Your Thoughts

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.