

## Ep #27: Competing Desires



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Rachel Hart**

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## Ep #27: Competing Desires

You are listening to the *Take a Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, episode 27.

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 everyone, how are you? Listen, I got to tell you about this movie that I saw recently. It is called *The Big Sick*, it is so funny. It's with the actor who plays Dinesh on *Silicon Valley*, if any of you watch that show, his name is Kumail Nanjiani. He and his wife Emily Gordon wrote *The Big Sick*, and loosely based it on the beginnings of their own relationship, and I'll tell you that long story short, guy meets girl, they fall in love, they break up because Kumail's family expects him to have an arranged marriage, but then the girl falls suddenly and mysteriously gravely ill, and that's where the story really starts, and it's so funny. I laughed so hard, you have to go check it out.

But I'm telling you about this movie not because it's great, which it is, and you should go see it, but because of what happened to me in line at the concession stand. So you know that I'm always trying to scan my life and find real life applications of this work that I can share with you, and you know, even though I no longer drink, I still use these tools all the time. So anyway, I'm standing in line waiting to get our snacks for the movie, and I will tell you, I am very specific about what I eat during a movie.

I eat Junior Mints, I always have since I was a kid, nothing else. In fact, the only time that I ever eat Junior Mints is in a darkened theatre. So my brain has a lot of practice associating the reward of Junior Mints with going to the movies. So there we are, we're standing in line, waiting to get up to the register, and I look around and I notice that a lot of the display cases where they normally keep the candy and the drinks and all of that, they're empty.

And it looks like somebody had come through earlier and just bought up everything from the concession stand, and my brain was like, "That's

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strange, where's all the candy?" And then I look to my right and on the counter, I notice a stack of candy boxes not where they should be, but there they are, and my brain starts scanning them for Junior Mints. But I don't see Junior Mints. I see M&Ms, and I see Reese's Pieces, and I see Skittles and Sour Patch Kids but that rectangular white box that says Junior Mints, it is nowhere to be found.

And I will tell you, my brain starts to panic a little, which is so ridiculous. Right? I mean, we're talking about Junior Mints here, this is not the end of the world. But my brain was panicking a little, and I turned to my husband and I say to him in this kind of quietly distressed voice, "They don't have any Junior Mints. Why don't they have any Junior Mints?"

And I could start to feel how annoyed I was. I was getting all kind of fidgety and tapping my foot a little bit, and I was looking around trying to see what all the people ahead of me were ordering, because maybe they were getting Junior Mints that I just couldn't see yet, and finally we get up to the counter, and immediately - so ridiculous when I think about this - but immediately to the woman at the register, I was like, "Hello, do you have any Junior Mints? Because I don't see any Junior Mints."

Like a crazy person, like a totally crazy person. And she's like, "Let me check." And I will tell you, that in the 15 seconds that it took her to go in the back and check, my brain was like in DEFCON 1. My brain had all this chatter. "Where will I get Junior Mints?" "How can this movie theatre not have them?" "I can't watch a movie without Junior Mints." "I will have to run down the street and go to Walgreens, do I even have time to go to Walgreens?" "This is ridiculous, I was promised Junior Mints."

This is what my brain is telling me over and over again, and you know what, they had Junior Mints. They did. Someone had forgotten to place the concession order for the week, and that's why the shelves were all empty and everything was still in the back. So I got my Junior Mints, but I also got to witness my brain freaking out that it might not get the reward it was expecting, the reward that I had trained it, I had trained it so well to come to expect, and this is so important for you to understand. All of you out there

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who are working on the urge to drink and watching your own brain freak out when it doesn't get the reward it is expecting from drinking.

And I like sharing this example with you guys because the truth is, we treat alcohol like it is this totally separate thing onto itself, but really the tools you can use to change your habits apply across the board. So what I'm teaching you applies well beyond just drinking.

Alright, so last week we talked about what happens when you escalate discomfort into chaos, and it is really important for you to understand this because so many of you are stuck in chaos. You're trying to change your drinking, you're feeling your urges, and then like me and the Junior Mints, freaking out in your own mind and turning the discomfort of an urge into chaos, deciding that it's just too hard, you can't do it, and then pouring yourself a drink.

And in order to stop escalating discomfort into chaos, you have to redirect your irrational mind. If you can do that, then you can start to really see why you are experiencing discomfort in the first place. So if you haven't listened to last week's podcast episode, I really want you to go back and check it out because today we are talking about what creates discomfort in the first place, and it is so much easier to understand this concept if you aren't currently stuck in chaos. So if you haven't checked it out, go do that now.

Alright, for those of you who have listened to last week's episode, I want to ask you this question: is the urge to inherently uncomfortable? Does it automatically feel bad? Now, you might be surprised by this, the answer is no. The urge to drink and any urge for that matter is not uncomfortable until you either can't answer it, or you decide you want to stop answering it. Okay?

So think of me and my Junior Mints at the movie theatre. I was headed to the movie theatre, and I was consciously looking forward to the movie, but unconsciously, my brain was also looking forward to my treat. The treat that I had taught it to expect, and the urge my brain had at that time for Junior Mints, it didn't feel bad at all. It wasn't uncomfortable because my brain was

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like, "We're going to the movies, I get a reward at the movies, that's just the way it works, that's the way it's always worked."

It wasn't until that moment standing in line, that moment that my brain started to realize, "Maybe this theatre is out of Junior Mints", that suddenly the urge did not feel so comfortable anymore. My brain started to panic that it wasn't going to get the reward it was expecting.

So you probably have a long period in your life of doing the exact same thing with alcohol without realizing it. You feel the urge to drink, and you answer that urge with a drink, with alcohol, and your brain gets a reward. And you do this over and over and over again. You feel the urge and then you drink. So you're saying yes to an urge and saying yes to an urge is not uncomfortable. When you say yes, you don't have any discomfort at all because your brain is getting what it is expecting.

Your brain is as happy as a clam because it keeps getting the dopamine fix from alcohol or in the case of Junior Mints, the dopamine fix from sugar. Discomfort only happens when your brain doesn't get what it is expecting. Right? When you can't drink. So have you ever had this happen - have you ever gone out to a new restaurant and discovered that they don't serve alcohol, or they haven't gotten their liquor license yet, and your brain is like, "No. When we go to restaurant, we get a reward, that's the deal. This is not okay." It's the same thing.

So the discomfort happens only when your brain can't get what you have trained it to want. But it also happens when you decide you want to change your drinking and start saying no to the urge, when you feel the urge to drink and you decide not to drink, then your brain also isn't getting the dopamine it is expecting, and that is when the urge becomes uncomfortable.

And on top of that, for so many of you, that is when you are turning discomfort into chaos. So you're trying to change the habit, you are upending your brain's expectations, and then on top of it, you are turning that discomfort into chaos with your thinking, just like I talked about last

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week. I really want you to understand this. You are feeling discomfort not because you have an urge, but because you are upending the expectation that your brain has to be rewarded.

You have unconsciously taught your brain to expect a reward in certain situations. You created a habit, and now your brain expects that it will get dopamine at certain times, in certain places, with certain people. And when you try to change your drinking, you are messing with the part of your brain that believes something good is about to happen, and that something good is an influx of dopamine.

Now, here's the good news. There is good news. The part of your brain that controls your habits is only one part of your brain. There is another part of your brain that has the power to change habits on purpose. Most of us do not understand our brain in this way, right? But what you do understand, and what many of you have articulated to me is that sensation of feeling like you almost have a split personality, or like you have competing desires. People will tell me this all the time, and I have heard from a lot of you who have done the work sheet, Your Complete Picture, and you tell me very, very similar things.

"I don't understand, I can see logically that this habit of drinking isn't serving me, yet there's this other part of me that's really drawn to it, I want to do it." Right? "I have these competing desires, I feel like I have this kind of split personality when it comes to drinking." And that is because there are two different parts of your brain that are currently at odds with each other.

Now, most of you who start to notice this tug of war see that as a sign that something is wrong with you. But nothing is wrong with you, and nothing is wrong with your brain. Your brain is functioning perfectly. It is working just as it should. The only problem is that no one has even handed you the instruction manual to help you understand how this incredibly powerful brain of yours works, and that is what I'm trying to do, to show you how it works, so you can start to understand that instruction manual.

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And this is what I want to talk to you about today. I want you to understand how your brain works so you can understand why you feel discomfort, but also why the human brain, why your brain is uniquely equipped to change habits. So I want you to think about your brain as if it is two different parts. There are two different sections to it, and those two different parts are the lower brain and the higher brain. You may have heard me talk about this before on the podcast probably as the lower brain versus the prefrontal cortex.

But for the sake of simplicity, I just want you to consider right now the lower brain and the higher brain. Now, there are many, many more parts of the brain. There are a lot of different structures and areas, but honestly, in order to understand how your habits work and how to change your habits, you do not need to get too complicated. So you have a lower brain and you have a higher brain. These are the two different sections in your brain.

Now, you already know that different parts of your brain have different functions. So let's talk about the different functions of the lower brain and the higher brain. Alright, let's start with the lower brain. You may have heard it called or referred to as the lizard brain, the animal brain, the ancient brain. All of these names reference the fact that this is the most primitive part of your brain. Every animal has a brain, and brains evolved and became more complex as life evolved and became more complex.

The lower brain is the earliest brain. It is the part of your brain that is concerned with the most basic of functions, and those functions have to do with survival. So the lower brain is tasked with ensuring survival. You've heard me talk about this before, this idea of part of your brain wants to seek pleasure, avoid pain, and do both of these things as efficiently as possible.

This is what mattered for survival, and the lower brain is in charge of survival. Seek pleasure, avoid pain, this will keep you alive. And if you are efficient while doing these things, if you can save energy, well then that's even better. And I will tell you, efficiency has everything to do with habits. Taking an action and making it unconscious, that is as efficient as the brain can get.

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So the lower brain is also where your habits reside. Remember, your brain wants to be efficient above all else. It doesn't care whether habits are good or bad, it just cares that you are saving energy because saving energy is linked with survival. And habits save energy by making your actions unconscious. You don't have to think, you can just do. And habits aren't bad things. Habits are useful. Just think about the habit of driving. Right? You can just hop in a car and drive off without thinking about the hundreds of steps involved.

The problem is when you find yourself with a habit that isn't serving you anymore. You find yourself with a habit like drinking more than you want that is giving you negative consequences, and no one has ever explained to you how to change that. So that's your lower brain. Your lower brain is concerned with survival, saving energy, seeking pleasure, avoiding pain, creating habits. But this is just one part of your brain.

As life evolved, the brain evolved, until we got to humans. Humans have the most complex and evolved brain on the planet, and thank god we have a higher part of our brain, because this is how we are able to change our habits. The higher brain, you can think of it as the human brain, or the thinking brain. This is where your prefrontal cortex resides. This is where your brain can do something uniquely human. It can plan, it can anticipate the future, it has the ability to reflect on itself, it has the ability for language, for weighing moral judgments. All of these things take place in your higher brain.

So not only can you think, but you can also think about your thoughts. You can reflect and contemplate. Your higher brain lets you observe yourself and this is the concept of being the watcher, or the observer; this idea that you can look at your own thinking. You can observe yourself, and this is a skill that you need in order to change your habits.

Having a higher brain is incredibly important, because it is the part of the brain that allows you to think about the consequence of your actions. It allows you also to inhibit your impulses. You can say, "No, I don't want to have another drink" or "I don't want to eat that piece of cake" or "I don't

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want to spend more money", right? In other words, you're not a slave to your lower brain, or your habits, because you have a higher brain, because you can think about what you do. You can watch and question your impulses because you're able to do these things, that is why you are able to change your habits.

And this brings us back to why an urge can be uncomfortable. Remember, the urge to drink does not cause discomfort until you try to intervene with an expectation that your lower brain has. Discomfort comes when you look at the results you are getting in your life and think, "Wait, this isn't what I want, I don't want to drink this much" or even "I don't want to drink at all right now, maybe I want to take a break, I'm not feeling good, I'm groggy and I'm gaining weight, I'm acting stupid, I'm making bad decisions, I'm not being a good role model to my kids, I'm outsourcing my fun, I don't think this is who I'm supposed to be."

Your lower brain doesn't care whether or not a habit is good or bad; it only cares about whether or not a habit is efficient. And so now, your lower brain which just cares about the habit and being efficient and getting the pleasure from dopamine and your higher brain, which can think about the consequences and think about your future and who you want to be, now they are at odds with each other.

Your lower brain cares only about pleasure and avoiding pain, survival and efficiency. It cares about habits, especially habits that have a very strong reward built in like drinking with the influx of dopamine that you get from alcohol. Alcohol gives you a nice big dopamine fix. It temporarily makes you feel good. And if you were feeling lonely or bored or insecure or awkward, it also does a really good job at getting rid of that negative emotion, covering it up.

Your lower brain is like, "I like this thing" and it starts to pay attention to what's happening in your environment when you give yourself this dopamine hit. It notices, "I get dopamine in the evening after work, when I get home, when I go out to dinner, when I go to restaurants, when I go to a party or at celebrations, on warm summer days, when I'm poolside, when

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I'm at a baseball game, when I'm on date night, when I'm meeting new people", right? It's starting to find cues in your environment so that it can learn how to create a habit.

So when you try to change a habit, your lower brain is like, "Hello, it is 6pm and I'm supposed to get a reward" or "Hello, this is a fancy restaurant, where's my reward? I was promised a reward" or "Hello, I am mingling. I know I get a reward of dopamine when I am mingling because I feel very awkward. I have been promised a reward. You've always given it to me in the past, why am I not getting it right now?"

But your higher brain, the other part of your brain is like, "Wait a minute, I don't want to do this. I'm trying something different. I know what I'm going to feel like tomorrow morning, I won't feel like running. If I start drinking I'm going to start snacking and then I'm going to have to step on the scale tomorrow morning or my co-workers are here and I don't want to act stupid in front of them, this is a new job, I don't want to make a fool of myself, I don't want to always have a glass of wine in my hand when my kids are around, I want to set a better example", right?

Your higher brain is able to think of the consequences. It's able to think about who you want to be and what you want to do, and this is where discomfort comes in. The discomfort you feel when you are experiencing an urge is the tension between the competing desires of your lower brain and your higher brain.

Your lower brain just wants dopamine when it expects dopamine, but your higher brain wants to have a life that it likes. It wants to have a life that it can feel good about and it can feel proud about. It wants to be what it thinks you can really be.

So the problem is that your lower brain is really fast because it is unconscious. It has speed on its side. So for any of you out there listening who think, or whoever thought to themselves, "I don't even know how that third glass happened, it was like I just reached out to pour it without even thinking", that's the speed that I'm talking about, that is the habit at work.

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And speed will always win unless you bring consciousness to what you are doing. Consciousness is how you intervene with speed. This is what your higher brain is all about. Consciousness. Your higher brain is smart, it can think about what it's doing. It has the power of impulse control. Your lower brain just has impulse, but your higher brain can control it.

Your higher brain can override your lower brain because of consciousness, awareness, watching, observing, and that is how you can change a habit. So many of you right now are frustrated because you are starting to witness these competing desires. You are feeling like, "Why do I have this split personality?" "Why am I at odds with myself?" But you are supposed to have competing desires. You are supposed to be at odds with yourself right now because that is how the lower brain and the higher brain function. That is watching the lower brain and the higher brain in action.

That's how your brain works. Competing desires means that you are normal. It means that your brain is functioning the way it is supposed to. So right now, if you feel like you have a split personality, that's just a sign that for the first time, you are really starting to see clearly your lower brain and your higher brain in action, and this is great news, because it means something very important. You are starting the work of bringing consciousness to the habit, and consciousness and awareness is the key to change.

Alright, keep those emails coming, I love hearing from you and I've heard from so many of you in the past couple weeks. You can send me a note at [podcast@rachelhart.com](mailto:podcast@rachelhart.com). Thanks for listening and see you next week.

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 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 [rachelhart.com/picture](http://rachelhart.com/picture) and download it now.

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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](https://RachelHart.com/join) and start your transformation today.