

Ep #32: Habit Cycle



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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 32.

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, how are you? What are you doing? I am fantastic. I just got back from Wyoming; I just got back from seeing the eclipse. I drove there with my husband and it was amazing. I really - I tell you, I cannot get over how surreal it was. I was so excited for this trip and so excited to see the eclipse for the first time. But I will tell you, it was way better than I could have anticipated.

And you know, there was a ton of coverage about the eclipse in the news, and really kind of rightfully so, because they're pretty rare. You know, they happen somewhere in the world every 18 months or so, but you have to be in the right place at the right time, or else you're really out of luck, and for us, the eclipse wasn't headed over San Francisco and so we actually decided that we were going to drive about a thousand miles to see it.

And the other kind of crazy piece of this is that you know, the actual amount of time that the sun was completely covered by the moon and that period is called totality, it's really short. And for this eclipse, totality didn't even last three minutes. It's so crazy when I really think about the trip that we embarked upon because we drove about a thousand miles to Wyoming to see something that would last for a hundred and sixty seconds.

And all the while when we were headed there, we had no idea, was the weather going to cooperate, would it be cloudy, would we even be able to see the sun, but in the end, it all worked out. And I'll tell you that in that really short window when the sun was in totality, the sun was completely covered by the moon and all you could see was the corona. It was weird, it

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was as if someone had lowered a dimmer switch on the sky and suddenly morning turned to sunset.

And it didn't take long before all these birds started flying overhead and I realized they were going home to roost because the sky was telling them the day was done. The sky was telling them go home. The birds didn't know that an eclipse was happening, they didn't know that the sunset wasn't real, they didn't know that it was only temporary and that everything was going to go back to normal in three minutes time.

All they knew was that when the world goes dark, it's time to start preparing for night. The sun and the sky for birds are cues that tell them what to do during different periods of the day, and this is why we're talking about the eclipse.

You've heard me talk about cues before in the podcast. Cues are really important if you want to start to understand and change your habits, and a cue is just a signal that your body uses to tell it to do something and when to do something. And many of these cues and signals, they are for actions that are automatic and they're entirely outside of your control.

So if you think of for example, the sun rising, that is a cue for us, it's a cue for our bodies, for our heart rate and our blood pressure and our body temperature to also rise at the beginning of the day, and the same is true when daylight descends. That's another cue for your body to really use to tell it, "Okay, now it's time to wind down, it's time to start to wind down the biological functions that happen during the day because now we're headed into sleep."

But here's the thing. Cues don't just matter for our Circadian rhythm, and that's a good thing because of course, those are things that are outside of our control. Cues really matter for habits. Your human brain uses cues to help form habits. And you can control and change the habits that you teach your brain by really understanding your specific cues.

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Now, I know it may not feel like habits are something that are entirely inside of your control because habits are often so fast and so automatic that it just feels like, I don't even know what happened, right? The habit just kicked in and my consciousness was sort of nowhere to be found. But you can learn to change a habit. Understanding how to change your drinking or how to take a break without just relying on willpower, without just gritting your teeth but actually learning how to change your desire requires that you identify and work with your cues.

So the birds in Wyoming got me thinking about this during the eclipse, but I want to tell you that cues are really not as mysterious as they might seem at first. They can be anything that gives your brain a signal to start the habit cycle. It can be a time of day or an event or an object, a smell, a sound, even a person. But the cues that I talk most often about on the podcast are emotional cues, right?

What I'm talking about is the feeling state that you experience immediately before you have the urge to drink. That feeling state for a lot of you is often negative. It might be that you're feeling bored or you're feeling stressed or awkward or lonely, but it can be a positive feeling state as well. Maybe you're excited or you're feeling celebratory, but I promise you this. If you start paying attention not only to your cues but in particular your emotional cues, start paying attention to how you are feeling before you start drinking, you will really begin to understand not only your unique cues because everyone is different, you will really begin to understand how the habit cycle works and how you can ultimately harness it to change the habit and change your desire.

Now, most of us are not so aware of our cues, and truthfully, it does sometimes feel like the urge to drink appears out of nowhere, and I had this experience for a very long time in my life. Just all of a sudden, I had this urge and it felt like it came out of the blue. And so if you feel this way as well, don't worry, I understand that's totally normal, but what I'm going to talk with you about today is really how that habit cycle works so that you can start to identify and understand your cues and use them to help change

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your drinking, and you're really going to do this by slowing down the cycle. Slowing down the cycle and really bringing attention and awareness to each piece of it is what will help you start to change it.

Now, remember habits are what make humans so efficient. Habits allow your brain to go on autopilot. Habits allow you to do something, to take some sort of action without having to concentrate on every single step. And I often use the example of driving a car; I think that's a really good one because so many of us are drivers.

Now, back when you were learning to drive, it took massive concentration, right? You didn't have a habit yet, it wasn't automatic, you had to really think about all the steps involved to get from point A to point B. And it's funny because when you think about it, when you think about when you were first learning this habit, it was like - you were behind the wheel and it was like, no talking, turn off the radio, don't distract me, right? You wanted total focus and concentration on what you were doing and it makes sense because your brain was learning how to operate several tons of machinery that were hurdling down the road, right?

But once you think about it, once your brain has learned this habit, when you think about your driving today, you don't have that same kind of focus and concentration. You're listening to music, you're carrying on conversations, your mind may be wandering, you may be totally lost in thought. Driving has just become this habit; it's become this automatic thing that you do that feels outside of your consciousness.

And your brain was built to run on habits. This is a good thing. Being able to do something like driving without thinking about it, it saves a lot of energy. It's what makes humans so efficient. But the unconscious nature of a habit while extremely useful is also at times extremely frustrating if you have a habit that you want to change. Being unconscious feels very frustrating.

But now the whole point of a habit is to move actions into your unconscious. Your brain doesn't discriminate between good and bad

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habits; it just wants you to be efficient. But because you've taught yourself a habit, it doesn't mean you don't have control over your actions. It doesn't mean that you are doomed to blindly follow the habit forever, and the reason you know this is because you have a higher brain. You have a prefrontal cortex. You can think about your thinking, you can examine your actions, you can weigh the pros and cons, you can notice your behavior, notice when it has become rote and not only that, but unhelpful, and decide to start doing something different.

But you have to understand how habits work. You are not like the birds that were flying over in the sky during the eclipse, right? You are not just sort of stuck with your cues and stuck not understanding why you do the things you do and not knowing how to change it. You are different because you have a human brain.

So every habit needs three things. The first thing it needs is repetition. Habits don't appear overnight. They unfold through a process of repeating an action over and over again, and this is true for drinking. Most people really - they never think about how many times you have repeated over and over again drinking when you get home from work, when you're at a restaurant, when you're at a bar, during a celebration, during the holidays, on a Friday night, on a Saturday night, at brunch, at parties, at networking events, at baseball games, you get the picture, right?

Think about all the times that you have engaged in repetition, all the times that you have engaged in the same action of drinking in certain situations. That is teaching your brain to do something without really thinking about it. Now, I know that some of you listening might be thinking, "Okay, that makes sense, but maybe you feel like I always have the tendency to overdo it. It seems like from the very first time I started drinking I was drinking a lot, before I was doing a lot of repetition."

And I'll tell you, this was certainly the case for me. I talk about this in my book, *Why Can't I Drink Like Everyone Else*, I talk about how I got really drunk at my first college party. And maybe you have a similar experience,

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and I will tell you, there's no doubt that some people seem to be drawn to alcohol more than others.

And that's true. The question is, well, why is it? And there's a lot of debate around this. Why does alcoholism run in families? Are there certain genes passed down in your DNA that make you more susceptible? Do we unknowingly mimic the behaviors and the environment we see around us? There's so much debate about the influences of genetic predispositions and environmental factors, and basically, you'll see once you start looking into this, it keeps going back and forth between this debate of nature or nurture.

And I will tell you that there are whole hosts of reasons why how you interact with alcohol may not be the same as another person interacts with alcohol, and I do believe that genetic predispositions and environmental factors can play a role in the appeal of alcohol. But here's the thing. Your genes and your family history and your past and your childhood and what you saw when you were growing up and the environment that you grew up in, these things are not your destiny.

Even if someone could prove that you are genetically predisposed to like alcohol more than someone else, there is a big difference between being predisposed and having something be predetermined. Your fate is not sealed. It's not sealed because you have free will, you have choice.

And personally, I will tell you that I think it is so much more effective, and I found it so much more effective for me, instead of fixating on why me, why am I struggling, why am I different - and let me tell you, it's a rabbit hole that you will go down and you will not find a satisfying answer at the bottom when you're fixated in this way. So instead of fixating on that, to really shifting and understanding the habit itself.

You know, focusing your brain to understand okay, what is my brain learning when I am drinking, what am I teaching my brain? What's happening here? Because habits are part of how our brain functions, and the learning how habits work is also how you learn how to change them.

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And the problem is that most of us are given zero information on any of this. We're given zero information on how habits work, how to change them, and we have this belief, this mistaken belief that we should be able to change anything by just snapping our fingers. And when it doesn't work we use will power, and when we get exhausted by will power, then we throw up our hands and say, "I quit." But in large part, it's because we don't understand the framework for how the habit cycle works.

You know, and when it comes to my own situation, certainly, a scientist could draw a blood sample from me and look at my DNA or investigate my childhood and look for clues as to why my environment made it possible that alcohol was something that I struggled with, but I really think there's something that matters so much more, and that is this. The belief that I had, the mistaken belief that I had that I needed a drink to be social, to be outgoing, to be confident and that having a drink was the only way to erase the feeling in the pit of my stomach that I didn't fit in, that I was completely out of my element, that I was awkward, that I was always going to feel insecure, that mistaken belief didn't just appear the first night that I got drunk.

That belief wasn't coded into my genes. That belief was something that I unknowingly taught my brain and I unknowingly practiced over and over and over again. All throughout college, all throughout my 20s. But here's the thing, if it was something that I taught myself, then I could certainly teach myself something different, and you can too.

So your brain needs repetition to learn a habit, no matter what your starting point is. It needs repetition to learn a habit and to change the habit. It needs you to practice an action over and over again so it becomes part of your muscle memory. Now, the problem with a habit like drinking is that most people have no idea that they're teaching themselves a habit. They have no idea that they're even teaching their brain anything. They just think, "It's a party. Of course I have a glass in my hand", "It's 6 pm, of course I'm opening a bottle of wine", "I'm at a restaurant, this is just what you do."

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And it's not until all of a sudden, you start to look around and realize, "Hey, I don't really like the results that I'm getting from drinking" or you find yourself drinking more than you want, that suddenly you have this compelling reason to try and change your behavior.

Okay, so the first thing that a habit needs is repetition, but repetition alone is not enough. The second piece of this puzzle, this second thing that your brain needs to form a habit is a reward. Rewards reinforce the habit cycle by letting your brain know there is a benefit waiting if it repeats the action in the future, and when your brain knows that a reward is waiting on the other side of an action, your brain decides, "Hey, I think that's pretty useful information. Maybe I should memorize it, maybe I should store it, maybe I should make a habit out of it."

Remember, rewards are really powerful. They're a really powerful piece of human survival. You can think about it this way. To survive in the world, you need to maximize contact with beneficial things, and minimize contact with the opposite. Minimize contact with harmful things, but how do you learn to do that? How does your brain learn what is beneficial and what is harmful?

And the answer is that our brain has a built in rewards system that helps with learning this. It helps with this process. So when you do something that is beneficial, you get a little bit of dopamine. It's released, you feel a little bit of pleasure, and that reinforces that activity in your brain. Your brain thinks, "Hey, that felt good. Let's remember this, let's do it again."

Rewards help humans learn what to eat and what to avoid, how to stay warm, how to procreate, how to stay safe from predators, it helped us do all of these things, but of course we're not living in the stone age anymore. Right now, your brain has to expend very little energy figuring out how to survive. But the reward system, the reward system that is so powerful and helped us, helped humans survive, helped us learn how to maximize contact with beneficial things and minimize contact with harmful things, that's still in place.

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So I want you to think about the example of driving. Now, I will tell you, there is a lot of satisfaction to be derived by the ability to ferry yourself from point A to point B on your own. Getting yourself somewhere is actually very satisfying. Now, it may not seem all that satisfying to you because our environment is just saturated nowadays in the modern world, with so many things that give your brain dopamine. And so the subtle reward that you get from being able to drive and being able to deliver yourself from point A to point B, it barely registers.

But if you doubt me, if you doubt that there is real satisfaction and pleasure behind this, just think about what would happen if someone took away your ability to drive. Now, I will tell you, I have watched several people in my own life lose this ability. Suddenly, they were under doctor's orders not to drive, either because they had a broken bone or because they were on certain medications that were contraindicated to driving and let me tell you, they were incredibly frustrated.

They forgot just how pleasurable it is to be self-sufficient; just how pleasurable it is to drive a car, until they couldn't do it anymore, and their brain was denied the reward. But now here's the thing, you think about that subtle reward that you get driving, that subtle reward that propels the habit cycle, and now I want you to think about the reward that you get when you drink.

You also get rewarded but it's very different. Alcohol delivers an influx of dopamine into your brain. It's concentrated, it's much more powerful. You get a buzz. But in addition to that, you get the reward of changing how you feel. If you were feeling stressed or awkward or insecure or bored or lonely before you raised a glass, before you raised a drink to your mouth, some of the negative emotions that you were feeling start to lose their grip a little bit, they start to shift a little once you start drinking.

Your brain learns that a drink is a quick and easy way to change or dull how you feel, right? But compare that subtle satisfaction you get from being able to drive yourself somewhere, to the intense dopamine hit you get from having a drink. They're really different. When humans discovered alcohol,

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they also discovered a way to deliver a concentrated hit of dopamine to the brain. The reward that comes with alcohol is much stronger than many of the other rewards in your environment. So your brain prioritizes it more, your brain has this reward system to help figure out how to survive, and that system is based on dopamine.

So if you look around in your environment and your brain is sort of weighing, "Hey okay, well what is giving me the most dopamine, what's giving me the most pleasure, that's what I'm going to use to prioritize what to remember, that's how I'm going to use what to prioritize to survive." All of a sudden you start to understand why the reward you get from alcohol can be so powerful.

Your brain starts to think that drinking is really important for survival because of that influx of dopamine and of course it isn't. You could go your entire life and never have a drink and it wouldn't matter in the least bit. So you have to pay attention and understand the reward your brain is getting, and know that when it comes to habits, not only are rewards very important to the habit cycle, but your brain prioritizes rewards. It prioritizes the things that give it dopamine. And in this case, it is misinformed. It is prioritizing something like a drink, like alcohol, that does not need to be prioritized.

So you have the repetition, and you have the reward, and that brings us to the third piece of the habit cycle, and that is cues. That's the piece that I opened with, that I started talking about at the beginning. Cues are a sign for your brain to start the habit cycle. Remember, habits are habits because they go unconscious. It is your brain powering down. But how does your brain know when to power down? How does it know when it can go unconscious? When it doesn't have to use all this energy to focus on something? When can it start? That's the question.

And your brain has to know when to start, it has to have a cue, otherwise it would go on autopilot at the wrong time. So what are your cues when it comes to drinking? Remember, cues can be anything. They can be a time of day or an event, an emotion, a smell, a food, an object, a sound, people,

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or - and this one is really important - an emotion. A cue can be how you are feeling.

So in order to figure this out, I want you to really think about this. I want you to write down everything. Everything that you can think of that is connected to when you feel the urge to drink. You have to really saturate your brain with consciousness and awareness if you want to start to understand and change the habit, so get really specific. More specific than you think you need to be.

Are there specific times of day when you're heading home from work, maybe once the kids go to bed. Are there specific events? It might be going to a restaurant, going to a bar, the holidays, birthdays, celebrations. Are there specific smells or sounds? So it could be sitting outside on your porch in the summer or opening up the fridge, or just watching other people around you drink.

Are there specific foods or objects or people that you seem to have urges around? And are there certain emotions that you seem to have that trigger your desire? And I will tell you that for a lot of people, it is stress and anxiety. I hear this time and time again. You know, I talk about this all the time, but your brain learns very quickly that having a drink is an easy way to dull or change how you feel, and so it is really important that you pay attention to what exactly you are feeling before that urge appears.

Now, when most people do this work, when they start to recognize their cues, they make a big mistake. They assume that the cues in their environment, the things that they notice cause their urges. It's the exact same way that people will assume that our external environment causes how they feel, but you know from the think-feel-act cycle that I talk about, that is not your external environment that creates how you feel, it's your thoughts that create how you feel.

Well, it's the same thing with urges. Your cues don't cause your desire to drink, your thoughts cause your desire. And these are thoughts that you practiced over and over again. Thoughts like, "That looks good, I want to

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drink, I need a drink, this won't be any fun without one, I just have to take the edge off right now", you get the picture. There were thoughts that you were practicing, that you were probably totally unaware of and unaware only because most people don't spend a lot of time noticing what we're thinking on a regular basis.

And now, because you have a habit around drinking. Now your thoughts are even more unconscious because they're part of the habit cycle and habits are designed to be unconscious. But your cues do not cause your desire. Those cues became part of the habit cycle because there was a thought, because you were thinking something. You just weren't noticing that thinking when it started and you certainly weren't noticing the thinking when you repeated the action over and over again and so the habit became unconscious.

But don't worry, it's not a problem. The way you can start to harness your cues to change habit is by paying attention to them. So the first thing to do is really identify it. Identify all the cues in your environment. Really pay attention to everything that is connected to your desire to drink. And remember, you don't have to hide from your cues. In fact, that can be counter productive, because it doesn't give you a chance to look at the thought connected to your cues.

Once you have identified them, then you can start to notice the thoughts connected with the cues, and the way you do this is by pausing. Once you feel the urge, if you immediately fulfill it, if you immediately feel that urge and go have that drink, feel the desire and pour a glass of wine, you will not notice the thought that is there.

But as soon as you pause, as soon as you deny your brain the reward, trust me, your thoughts will appear. You will start to have a lot of awareness around the thinking connected to your cues, and once you have that awareness, then you can start to shift them. You can start to shift what you are thinking around your cues. You can start teaching your brain that just because your brain spotted a cue in your environment, just because you're around other people who are drinking, just because it's 5:30, just

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because the kids went to bed, that does not mean that you automatically have to reward the desire that you feel.

Now, if you automatically reward it, you will just continue the habit cycle, but you do not have to automatically follow those cues. You are not the birds in the sky, that when the dimmer switch went down, and it was sunset, the only thing to do was to go home to roost.

You can teach your brain something different. You can feel the urge to drink and you can not reward your brain with that influx of dopamine, not reward the cue, not do the repetition again, and that - when I'm talking about how you change your desire, that is exactly how you do it. I didn't pinpoint all my cues and then hide from them. I noticed all my cues and then I noticed the thinking that was connected to them. I understood how my cues were fuelling the habit cycle, and how unconsciousness was such a part of that.

So I had to bring awareness to it. I had to start shifting my thinking, I had to teach my brain something new, I had to teach it that it didn't just have to automatically be rewarded with dopamine every time a cue appeared. My brain had to learn something different. If I could teach my brain unknowingly that when I felt an urge to drink, when I felt an urge I drink, and that drinking was a way to change how I feel and drinking was a way to change how I feel, well guess what, I could start to teach myself the opposite.

I could feel an urge and not drink. Feel an urge and not drink. I could learn that there are other ways to change how I feel without the dulling effect or the numbing effect of pouring a drink. So this is really important. I really want you guys to understand this. I want you to really pay attention to what those cues are for you. They will be very unique for everyone, but bring awareness to it. That is how you start to shift a habit. Habits want to be unconscious, and so the way to shift them is to bring awareness.

So try it out, let me know how it goes. Let me know what you come up with. You can always reach out to me, send me an email, let me know any

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questions you have about this topic at podcast@rachelhart.com. Otherwise, I'll 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 and download it now.

Okay, listen up, changing your drinking is so much easier than you think. Whether you want to drink less or not at all, you don't need more rules or willpower. You need a logical framework that helps you understand and, more importantly, change the habit from the inside out. It starts with my 30-day challenge. Besides the obvious health benefits, taking a break from drinking is the fastest way to figure out what's really behind your desire. This radically different approach helps you succeed by dropping the perfectionism and judgment that blocks change. Decide what works best for you when it comes to drinking. Discover how to trust yourself and feel truly powered to take it or leave it. Head on over to RachelHart.com/join and start your transformation today.

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