

Ep #45: Harnessing Metaphor



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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 45.

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 doing? We are talking about one of my favorite topics today, which is the ways in which the brain makes things in our environment that are intangible, tangible. I love this, I think it's incredibly interesting, there's a lot here today for you to learn and see how small shifts can make a tremendous difference.

You know, so much of what I'm talking to all of you about, I'm talking about emotions and urges and feelings, and all these things that are intangible, right? You can't see them, there's no substance to touch or to feel, and because of that, they can feel really mysterious and very unknown. And you know what, humans have a drive to understand things. We don't like things that are unknown. We want to understand, we want an explanation, and language is amazing for that purpose. Language helps us make the unknown known. It helps us make the intangible tangible because we can put words and concepts and ideas to these things.

So, growing up, my dad was a middle school English teacher. He's retired now, but language and words and grammar, it was all around us. And he has a very precise understanding of grammar and rules and what is correct and what is incorrect and what is right and what is wrong when it comes to the English language, which just as on the side is kind of funny because one of the first poets he introduced me to was E. E. Cummings, who if you know anything about E. E. Cummings, he is the poet who spells his name without capital letters, and if you've ever seen any of his poems, you know, this guy's never met a grammar rule that he thought was worth following.

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Punctuation is crazy and spelling is crazy and spacing and line breaks, all totally crazy. But you know, nevertheless, my dad seemed to still really like him even though he also loves his rules. So being the daughter of a middle school English teacher is both a blessing and a curse. It is a blessing because you have a dad at home that can answer any grammar question that you throw at him, no matter what. I mean, he never hesitates, he always has an answer. But it is also a curse because he can answer any grammar question that you throw at him, so you kind of never learn the rules.

And when I realized that we were going to be talking about metaphors today and how to use metaphors to your advantage, I got that kind of "Uh-oh, I got to look this up. Am I talking about metaphors? Am I talking about similes?" I was so sure like, "I'm getting into tricky territory here." So here's the thing. We're going to talk about this as a tool, it may not be grammatically correct in terms of how I describe metaphor, but this is what I can tell you. Both metaphors and similes, they are things that we use to draw a comparison. So a metaphor directly states the comparison. For example, love is a battlefield, the comparison is between love and the battlefield. And a simile uses the words like or as to compare something. So for example, my love is like a burning flame.

The thing is, it doesn't really matter. As long as you get the concept, at least for the purposes for coaching, it doesn't really matter. As long as you get the concept of using comparison as a way to help you explain and understand something in your life that is intangible, you are always using language to make the unknown known and the intangible tangible.

Now, here's the thing, and this is what I see all the time, and what I discovered for myself and I see my clients doing all the time. Using language to make the unknown known can be incredible helpful or it can be kind of harmful. It can really backfire. So you have to pay attention to this, you have to pay attention to the language you are choosing and using.

So this is the thing. The think-feel-act cycle, what it tells you is that your thoughts create your feelings, and your feelings drive your actions. So you

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have to pay attention to your thoughts. You have to pay attention to the words and the language choices that you're making. Remember, thoughts are just sentences in your mind, and they're sentences constructed from your language. So the ways in which you make the unknown known are going to impact how you feel, because your thoughts create your feelings. Word choice really, really matters. The comparisons that you choose really, really matter.

I talk about metaphor, I talk about this idea a lot, but I actually talk about it for the first time in episode three of the podcast, and I talk about why humans use metaphors, like describing butterflies in your stomach when you're nervous, or a storm brewing inside when you're angry, and the reason is because so many people find it incredibly difficult to express what exactly they're experiencing when they feel an emotion.

And the truth is, this makes perfect sense because most of us never have the experience of someone in our life sitting us down, especially not when we were kids, and saying, "Alright, I'm just going to explain to you what exactly is happening in your body when you feel an emotion. Whenever you feel an emotion, things are changing in your body. Your heart rate is changing, your breathing is changing, your muscles might tense or relax, your temperature may be changing, all these different hormones are flowing through the body. They have an impact on your digestive system and your nervous system."

Right? Nobody explains that to us, and so we feel these changes in our body and we're like, "What is going on?" Right? Think about it. Think about it as a kid how it must have felt for the very first time recognize your emotions and not understand what was happening because nobody was like, "Hey guess what, it's totally normal. All these things are supposed to change, it means that everything's right on track."

Instead, we feel our heart racing and maybe we have this weird sensation in our stomach, and we're like, "Oh my god, something is really wrong." So you know, it makes perfect sense that because really in our culture we're not taught this that we start to use metaphor as a way to understand our

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emotions. We do it precisely because it's difficult to express exactly what we're feeling when we're experiencing an emotion because no one has ever shown us how. No one has ever shown us to look to the physical sensations. So we need the help of metaphors like butterflies in our stomach to make sense of what is happening.

And you know what, I'll tell you, I think we also need metaphors in part because a lot of us don't even grow up with a lot of emotional fluency. So it may not even be that we can't understand or we're struggling to understand what we're feeling in our body, but no one's really sitting down and explaining emotions generally to us. And so using metaphors, using comparison helps make what is - feels mysterious and unknown, helps make it known.

Now the problem is this. Sometimes, metaphor can be extremely unhelpful. And when I find this to be true, it most often when people are starting to do this work, they most often start to use unhelpful metaphors when they are using them to describe their emotions. Now, not all metaphors are unhelpful when you're describing your emotions, but some can be.

So I was working with a client recently and we were talking about her anxiety, and so we had identified that anxiety was the emotion that she was feeling, and then from there one of the things that I want people to do is really focus on, okay, so what are those specific physical sensations in your body? What's happening in your body? And listen, the reason that you do this is because you're trying to start to understand, "Alright, well why am I telling myself I can't feel anxious? Why am I telling myself that anxiety is intolerable?"

Most people don't ever question it. Most people are just like, "Anxiety is terrible, why would you ever want to feel it?" Right? And if you pulled your friends, everyone would be like, "Duh, we don't want to feel anxiety." Right? It's such a common idea that negative emotions are bad, negative emotions are a sign that something has gone really wrong.

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And so one of the reasons that you tune into your body is to get really, really clear with yourself, what are you moving away from? What are you trying to cover up? And especially when you're using a drink to change how you feel, then it's incredibly important to understand, "Okay, so what am I moving away from? Why am I telling myself I can't be present with this emotion? Why am I telling myself that I have to immediately change how I feel?" If you can get specific on those physical sensations connected with any emotion, you can start to change the conversation.

So I was asking her what anxiety felt like in her body and we were doing this for the first time, this was a new concept for her. And so she was - started using metaphor to describe what she was feeling, and she said to me this: "I feel like I have a ton of bricks on my chest and a vice grip on my forehead." And I really - I kind of appreciate how specific she was. For those of you who are not familiar with all the tools in the toolbox, a vice grip is essentially pliers that you can adjust the spacing of the jaws and once you get the jaws to the right size basically you can lock them in place.

So doesn't that sound delightful to have on your forehead? Right? Almost as enjoyable as having a ton of bricks on your forehead. But this was her first time, and she was trying to describe exactly what she was feeling in her body. And I see this happen a lot, that people when they're trying to describe the physical sensations in their body, they can start to use very unhelpful metaphor. Because think about it, think about if you're like, "This is like a ton of bricks on my chest or a vice grip on my forehead." Right? Like, your description of the emotion, that's a thought, your description, and doesn't sound particularly positive, right?

So it's like your metaphor, your way to understand it can actually be creating negative emotion for you. So often when I ask people to describe their emotions, they start to use metaphor in a really negative way instead of what I want you to learn how to do, is to stick with some of the neutral physical sensations. So just to give you a sense, here's what that would sound like when you're just describing a neutral, physical sensation.

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"My heart is beating faster", "My chest is tight", "My jaw is clenched", "Palms are sweaty", "Stomach fluttering", "My shoulders are tense and high", "I feel tingles in my feet", "My mouth is dry", "My throat is closing", "Eyes are watering", "My face is flushed", "My hands are cold", "My shoulders are heavy", "I feel a vibration in my lower back", "My stomach is hollow", "There's pressure on my forehead".

Now listen, I understand as I was going through that list of physical sensations, you may be like, "I don't know, none of those sound great either", but notice how they're all listed without judgment and opinion, right? Compare "My chest feels tight and there's pressure in my forehead" to "There's a ton of bricks on my chest and my forehead is in a vice grip." The first is pretty neutral, right? Chest feels tight, pressure on forehead. The second, not so much.

So I want you to think about this. I want you to think about how powerful metaphor and comparison is in this moment. If you are already experiencing a negative emotion, you're already experiencing anxiety or anger or insecurity or loneliness or boredom, you're already experiencing a negative emotion, if you then start to try to use these tools and describe how that emotion is presenting in your body but you use metaphor and language that is very negative, what are you going to do? You're going to create more negative emotion for yourself. Think about that.

You're already experiencing a negative emotion, and then the language you're using to describe it is creating more negative emotion on top of it. That's why you have to be extremely careful about your word choice and the comparison and the metaphor that you're using, and I really see most times when this happens at first, it is with the language we use to describe what we're feeling in our body to describe our emotions.

Now, here's the thing. Metaphor can also be extremely helpful. I don't want to give metaphor and comparison a bad name because I think that when used correctly, it can be so transformative. So transformative for the way that you see and interact with your feelings and your urges and your desire and your emotions.

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I had a really great example of this recently. I was working with a client and she has been doing a lot of practice to be present with her urges and not just react to the urge to drink, to just let the urge be there. And she said, "You know, it's kind of like wearing an itchy sweater" and I just thought, "This is so brilliant" because so many of us can relate to that experience. You can relate to the experience if you buy a sweater or some sort of clothing and you try it on for 10, 15 seconds in the store and it looks good, you think it'll be a nice addition to your wardrobe, and then you wear it to work.

And maybe it's not even an itchy sweater, maybe it's a shirt with a scratchy tag. Right? And you wear it for the first time, and once you have it on for an extended period of time, you're like, "Jeez, it's kind of itchy. It's kind of uncomfortable." Now, here's the thing. You may not love being itchy, you may not love that feeling of the scratchy tag, but you're at work, you're not like racing out to the Gap to buy a new sweater, to buy a new shirt. You can deal with it. And that was a metaphor that was so brilliant I thought, and so powerful for her that she was able to say like, "It's kind of like an itchy sweater. You know, like I don't love it but I'm not dying."

And I - this is how I think that metaphor can be so powerful and helpful and it can make all the difference, because it is such a shift to go from, especially when you're thinking about any urge that you're feeling, to go from, "I can't stand this, this is terrible, I hate it" to "I don't - this is not the best, I don't love it, but it's not that bad. It's like an itchy sweater." That is such a big shift. All the, "It's terrible, I hate it, I can't stand it, I hate this feeling", all of those thoughts are going to generate more negative emotions on top of the negative emotion that you're already experiencing.

Do you see how you can compound it when you're using unhelpful metaphor, or when you just have negative thoughts about how this is unbearable or you can't stand it? But when you use a helpful metaphor, when you say, "My urge is kind of like an itchy sweater", then all of a sudden that shifts things for you. All of a sudden, just that idea can make it for you, maybe feel a little bit more tolerable.

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So now, you might think - I actually had someone say this to me recently when I was sharing this idea. She said, "Okay, I get it", like the itchy sweater metaphor did not work for her, and that's the thing, one metaphor that works for someone will not necessarily work for you. She said, "Yes, but if it's itchy like, I can take off the sweater, but I can't take off the urge. I can't just snap my fingers and make it go away." And what I said to her, I said, "Okay, so what about when you put on a pair of uncomfortable underwear?" Right? I think everyone has had this experience. You get dressed in the morning and then you head off to work and you're walking down the street and you're like, "This is not working, I do not like this pair of underwear, I think I will never wear this pair again."

But legitimately, what are you going to do? Right? You're just going to go through your work day, it's going to be a little uncomfortable, the underwear is not working for you, it is not the right cut, but again, you're not like racing off to the department store to buy yourself a new pair. You have to think about the language that you're using, and it was interesting because for this woman, you know, the idea of like, uncomfortable underwear, that worked for her, whereas for another woman, it was this idea of an itchy sweater.

But the point is for you to really think about the language you are using. Is it helping matters or is it making it worse? Are your metaphors productive? Are you using a metaphor like, "It's an itchy sweater, I can handle an itchy sweater, it's not a big deal, it's not my favorite but it's not the end of the world" or are you telling yourself, "Oh my god, I've got a ton of bricks on my chest and a vice grip on my forehead."

Language like that is going to add negative emotion on top of negative emotion, and this is why you have to pay attention to your word choice, and use metaphor, but use metaphor wisely. Always ask yourself, "Hey, how is that metaphor making me feel? How is that comparison making me feel? Does it make me feel better? Does it feel more tolerable, however I'm feeling? Do I feel more capable or is it making me feel worse?"

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One thing that I always tell people, you know, there's this idea of like, "It's only semantics. Semantics, we're just quibbling over the meaning of a word." Here's the thing. When it comes to the think-feel-act cycle, semantics matter. The meanings of words matter. Language is the medium by which we create our thoughts, and your thoughts create your feelings so choose wisely.

Alright everybody, I'll see you next week.

Hey guys, if you want to go over to iTunes and leave a review about the podcast if you're enjoying it, I would love it. But not only that; I am giving everyone who does a free urge meditation. I will tell you, this meditation, it is super simple. All it takes is five minutes and a pair of headphones. If you are having an urge and you want a different way to handle it, just pop those headphones in, find a place where you can sit down undisturbed and teach your brain, retrain your brain a very simple method to make urges more tolerable. All you need to do is head on over to rachelhart.com/urge and input your information there.

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.