

Ep #48: How Questions Work in Your Brain



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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 48.

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 guys, we are going to talk about questions today. Now, you may be thinking, "How do questions connect? How do questions matter when it comes to changing habits?" But I want to tell you this. They are such, such a powerful piece that I will tell you is so often overlooked. The fact of the matter is that you and me and everyone, all of us, we are asking ourselves questions all day long. Questions like, "What should I wear?", "What do I want to eat?", "What time do I have to be there?", "When can I leave", "How much longer is this line going to take?", "Why is traffic so backed up?", "How will I ever finish this project?", "What are they going to think about this presentation?", "Why is she acting this way?", "Who left this mess in the kitchen?" Right?

Questions are a part of our mental chatter. We have tens of thousands of thoughts running through our mind every day, and a large portion of those thoughts start with questions. And it makes sense, right? Because we're always trying to understand the world around us. We're always trying to understand our environment and who we are. Humans are inquisitive. We are inquisitive by nature. We have a drive to understand the world around us. We have a drive to understand why things work the way they do, and asking a question, when you think about it, it's the very first step in the scientific method. Questions are the starting point for millions of inventions and discoveries and innovations.

I like to think about it this way. Some early human being, five thousand years ago in the middle of the Bronze Age that they didn't know was the Bronze Age, they thought to themselves, "How can I transport stuff more

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easily? There's got to be a better way", right? They asked themselves this question, and low and behold, five thousand years ago, the wheel was invented and it revolutionized the way early humans travelled and transported goods from one place to another. And all of it, all of it started with just one question, how can I transport things more easily?

So questions are an incredible important tool not just for inventors and scientists though, questions are a really important tool for every single one of us, and even better, it's a tool that everyone has access to. It's free, it doesn't cost any money. The problem is this: no one ever teaches us how to use questions effectively, and many of you are actually using questions in a really destructive way. The way that you are using questions is actually preventing you from changing, it's keeping you stuck, and it's making it so that it's difficult to make headway on your habits. It's difficult to change your drinking. So that's what I'm going to be talking about today. I'm going to be talking about what happens when you pose a question to yourself, what happens in your brain, how questions work in the think-feel-act cycle, because they do work in a very specific way, the means by which certain questions keep you stuck, and how to use questions on purpose to jumpstart change, and frankly, just to feel better more often.

Alright, so let's start with this. Let's just start with understanding what a question is. Now, remember, I talk about this in previous episodes. A thought is just a sentence in your mind. I think that that is the easiest, simplest way to think of what a thought is. It's a sentence in your mind. And the reason you want to pay attention to all these sentences in your mind, the reason why you want to pay attention to your thoughts is because what you're thinking creates how you are feeling, and then how you're acting. So a question is slightly different. A question that you ask yourself, it's also a sentence in your mind, it's also a thought, but it is expressed in a way to get you to illicit additional information.

So in short, a question prompts your brain to start looking for answers, and those answers that your brain starts looking for are of course, more thoughts. So two things happen when you pose a question to yourself.

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One, you send your brain on a mission to answer that question, and two, you come up with thoughts to answer the question at hand. You're sending your brain on a mission and then you're coming up with thoughts that answer that question.

When you ask your brain a question, it really wants to find an answer. Our brains do not like not knowing things, right? Just think of all the time that you're out talking with your friends, or your family, and the group can't remember the year that something happened or the name of an actor, or who wrote a song, and what do you do? You whip out your phone and you look it up. You go to Wikipedia or you Google it. Our brains are designed to seek out answers, and we're seeking them out all the time. But there are some questions, questions about yourself, questions about your world that aren't easily Googled. Yet your brain is still searching for an answer, and the answers that your brain comes up with, the thoughts that you think in response to the question, those thoughts become part of the think-feel-act cycle.

So I'm going to give you an example so that you can really understand this. Let's take for instance the question, "Why hasn't my friend responded to my email?" I can tell you, I have had this question, I know all of you out there have thought this before. "Why hasn't my friend gotten back to me and responded to my email?" Now, you can't type that into Google, you can't go on Wikipedia and find the answer, but your brain still wants to know. Your brain is still unsure why is this happening. Now, here's the thing. The question itself, "Why hasn't my friend responded to my email?", it doesn't make you feel anything until you answer that question with a thought. I want you to think about that. The question itself doesn't make you feel anything until you answer it with a thought.

And there are so many available thoughts that you could think to this question, but I'm just going to select two. You could think, "I bet she's really busy with everything going on at work." That's one potential answer to that question, why she hasn't gotten back to you. Or you could think, "Maybe she's annoyed at me and that's why she hasn't responded." So both

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answers are in response to the same question, but you'll see, one is positive or neutral really, and the other is negative. And you can see how depending on the answer that your brain comes up with to the question, you're going to have two very different think-feel-act cycles.

In one cycle where your brain decided, "She must be really busy at work", in that one, when you think that thought, she must be really busy at work, you're likely to feel care or compassion, right? You're likely to have kind of positive emotions. But in the other example where your brain decided that she must be annoyed at you, when you think that thought, in the think-feel-act cycle, what that is going to create is probably anxiety or worry. So the question is the same, the question was, "Why hasn't my friend responded to this email?" But depending on the answers you come up with, it will make a dramatic difference in how you feel.

Now, here's the thing. For most of us, before we start noticing and paying attention to our thoughts, they're often barely in our awareness, and the same is true for all the questions that we're asking ourselves all day long. Lots of times we just don't even have awareness that we're even asking these questions and so without that awareness, we're also not really aware of the answers that we're coming up with. We're unconscious to much of this process. Now, the good news is that of course you can work to change that. you can work to pay attention to your thinking, pay attention to the questions that you're asking yourself and the answers that you're coming up with.

So if you've been listening to the podcast for a while now, you may have already spotted a potential problem with how questions work in our brain. Now, I talk a lot about how the brain evolved to spot danger in our environment. Thousands of years ago, looking at a bush and wondering if there was a tiger in there, that was a good thing. That kept humans safe because we were living in environments that were very dangerous. Each day brought on new challenges to our survival, and so it was a huge benefit for the human brain to be able to spot the negative and to be on alert all the time for danger.

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But now here's the problem. Thousands of years later, here we are in modern day and most of us live in a day-to-day life where our survival is not constantly on the line. Yet our brain is still programmed to tilt towards the negative. It's still spotting all that danger. And our brain thinks it's being helpful, it thinks it's trying to keep us safe, when in reality, once you understand how the think-feel-act cycle works, you see that all of those negative thoughts in response to questions are creating negative emotions.

So when it comes to the questions you ask yourself, you can start to see you know, how the deck is kind of stacked against you if you're not supervising your own mind, if you're not paying attention to what you're thinking about. You can answer any question really and come up with a neutral, positive, or negative answer, but because our brain evolved to prioritize the negative, once you start paying attention to how you answer the questions that run through your mind, all throughout the day, you're going to start to notice that more often than not, your answers are skewing negatively, and that has a big effect on how you feel.

You know, I like to think of it like the Magic 8-Ball. I don't know if you guys remember playing with this growing up. My friend Sarah had one of these. I didn't have one, but every time I went to her house I wanted to play with the Magic 8-Ball. And so we would ask the Magic 8-Ball a question and we would shake it up and then we would turn it over and we would wait for the response to appear. And we do this questioning after question, waiting for more responses, and the Magic 8-Ball, it actually has 20 possible responses that you can get. So you can get responses anywhere from, "Hazy, ask again", or "Outlook good, all signs point to yes", or "Very doubtful", right? There's all these different responses that you can get to your question, and I was researching the Magic 8-Ball online - of course, because I wanted to know the answer - I was researching it online for this episode, and I discovered that of those 20 possible responses that you can get when you play with a Magic 8-Ball, ten are positive, five are non-committal, and five are negative.

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So when you're playing with the Magic 8-Ball, when you're asking the Magic 8-Ball a question, you actually have pretty decent odds of getting a positive response. But here's the thing. When it comes to your brain, it's like every time we ask a question, we're working with a kind of defective Magic 8-Ball. A Magic 8-Ball where the odds are stacked against us, because once we start paying attention, we just notice that almost all of our responses tilt towards the negative. We are unconsciously asking ourselves questions all day long, sending our brain on a mission to find the answers to these questions and then coming up with answers that are, "It look doesn't look good", "Don't count on it", "All signs point towards no." Right?

And so, the first thing you really have to remember is that your brain likes to answer the questions that you pose it negatively. It thinks it's being helpful but it's not. So if you're not supervising your brain, if you're not paying attention to how you are automatically answering the questions that you ask yourselves, you are setting yourself up for a lot of think-feel-act cycles that are producing negative emotions for you and negative outcomes.

But here's the other thing to really pay attention to. Some of the questions that we ask ourselves actually can't be answered in a positive way. This is a really, really important piece for you to understand. Some of the questions that we ask ourselves, the very premise of the question is so negative that even if you are supervising your brain, even if you are aware that your brain likes to spot the negative, even if you're aware that that automatic negative response is likely to come up, you're going to be very hard pressed with some of these question to come up with a positive or even a neutral answer, and that's why I call them dead end questions and you must pay attention to these types of questions.

So I'll give you a couple examples. "What's wrong with me?", "Why am I such a screw up?", "How come I never stick to my plans?", "Why do I always get into bad relationships?", and then of course, this is the question that plagued me for so long, "Why can't I drink like everyone else?" I want you to notice these questions. All of these questions, these dead-end

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questions are starting out with a negative premise. When you ask yourself what's wrong with you or why you're such a screw up, your brain is not going to search for answers for what's right with you. Your brain will only be looking for answers that support the original premise of the question that something is wrong with you, or that you're a screw up. And when you ask yourself, "How come I never stick with my plans?" or "Why do I always get into bad relationships?" your brain again, it's still on a mission to find an answer, but it's working with such a negative premise, so it's unlikely that you are going to answer that question by finding evidence that actually sometimes you do stick to your plans or that some of your relationships have been healthy, because those sorts of answers don't fit with the original premise of each of those questions.

And the thing to really pay attention there is that kind of all or nothing language. The use of 'never' or 'always', right? Why do I never stick with my plans? Why do I always get into bad relationships? That all or nothing language ensures that your brain is only going to find negative answers. And I know a lot of you are asking dead end questions when it comes to your drinking. I did this for such a long time. I mean I really - I did it with that question, "Why can't I drink like everyone else?" over and over and over again. So in addition to that one, you know, that I asked myself for more than a decade, there were questions that I was asking like, "Why can't I control myself?", "Why can't I handle my liquor?", "Why is this my struggle?", and just simply, "Why me?"

The answers to all of those questions created negative emotions for me. Emotions like shame and embarrassment, frustration, isolation, hopelessness and powerlessness, and guess what, you know how the think-feel-act cycle works. How you think creates how you feel and how you feel drives how you act. So if you're feeling ashamed or embarrassed or frustrated or isolated or you don't have any more hope, you don't feel like you have any power, you are not going to take action in a way that is going to bring about change. In fact, you're going to stay stuck.

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So now you know a couple things. You know number one, that when you ask your brain a question, it goes on a mission to find the answer. Number two, that the answer that your brain comes up with, your thoughts, that's what your answers are, they're thoughts, that then generate an emotion as part of the think-feel-act cycle, so you have to pay attention to what those answers are. Three, your brain is hardwired to preference the negative. It thinks it's being helpful, it thinks it's spotting danger for you. So what you're going to discover once you start paying attention is how often you are just automatically answering even neutral questions. Not just the dead-end questions, even neutral questions like, why didn't she respond to my email, you're coming up with negative answers.

And four, many times we're actually asking ourselves dead end questions. We're asking our brain questions where the very premise is so negative that it is almost impossible for us to come up with the positive or even a neutral answer. And so, you have to pay attention to those dead-end questions because I will tell you, they are killer when you want to make change.

Understanding how questions work in the think-feel-act cycle, it might lead you to believe that questions are a set up for failure, but remember what I said at the beginning. Questions are one of your brain's most powerful tools. Questions are the start of inquiry and discovery and invention. And when it comes to personal development, questions are the beginning of transformation, and so what you need to do is this. You need to understand what questions do to your brain, you need to understand the preference to answer questions negatively, and you need to understand what a dead-end question looks like. A question that you cannot possibly answer in a positive way, and then with all that information, you need to flip and start using powerful questions.

Powerful questions don't just start from a positive place, they are also open minded, they are thought provoking, they are compassionate often, but most importantly, they force you to think differently. They open up space in your mind while your brain is hunting for an answer. They open up space

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for inquiry and insight and appreciation. And that is why they're so powerful.

So let me give you some examples of powerful questions. "How can I practice more love right now?", "How can I find gratitude in this situation?", "What would curiosity do in this moment?", "How can I create more connection?", "What can I give?", "What is perfect about this situation?", "How can I make this more fun?", "How can I create what I want?" Right? Those I will tell you, are probably not very common questions. I know a lot of you out there can really relate to asking yourself dead end questions. "What is wrong with me?", "Why am I such a screw up?", "Why am I a failure?", "How come I can't ever figure this out?" You are familiar with dead end questions. But what I want you to do is start to shift to powerful questions because I tell you, that is going to change everything for you.

And here's the thing. Often it only takes a subtle shift to turn a dead end question into a powerful one. So you can go from asking yourself, "How am I ever going to figure this out?", where your brain is probably automatically coming up with answers like, "I'm not going to figure it out", "I can't figure it out", and you can shift it to, "How can I find a solution?" How many times have you asked yourself that? How can I find a solution? You can take a question like, "Why is she such a jerk to me?" and slightly shift it to, "I wonder what she might be thinking right now to act this way." Right? I mean that puts your brain on such a different path of inquiry. When you go from, "Why is always such a jerk to me?" to "What could she be thinking? What could her think-feel-act cycle be working right now to explain why she's acting the way that she is?" That question makes you curious, right? You don't get a lot of curiosity from, "Why is always such a jerk to me?"

A question like, "Why am I so fat?" becomes, "What can I do to take care of my body today?" Right? It's a small shift, but it gets you thinking in such a different direction. I mean, think about where your brain goes when you ask the question, "Why am I so fat?" Does it go anywhere good? I don't think so. But when you ask yourself, "What can I do to take care of my body

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today?", all of a sudden it gets your brain thinking in a different way because we're not used to using these kinds of powerful questions.

And here's the thing. This work of course applies when it comes to changing your drinking. So "Why can't I control myself?" can become "What am I in control of?" "Why can't I handle my liquor?" can become "How can I handle this moment differently?" or "How can I handle this moment without taking the edge off?" "Why is this my struggle?" becomes "What am I learning from this?" and "Why me?" right? I used to ask myself that question all the time. "Why me? Why me? Why is it so hard for me?" can become "Why not me?"

So they're such subtle ways that you can really shift a dead-end question to a powerful question and it will make all the difference because no matter what, if you're asking a question, your brain is going on a hunt to find an answer, and it matters what answers you come up with. And the answers that you come up with many times are shaped by the premise of the original question.

So here's your homework. This is what I want you to pay attention to. One, start bringing awareness to the questions that are running through your mind, and if there are of those dead-end questions that I mentioned today, if any of those seem like they come up a lot for you, just bring awareness to the questions that you ask yourself. I want you to also notice if your brain is coming up with negative answers. Now, here's the thing. Nothing has gone wrong if that's the case. You understand why that is, but you have to become first aware of it, and then start to supervise it. Start to see if maybe I can come up with a neutral answer. Maybe I can come up with a slightly positive answer. Identify those dead-end questions. Questions that have baked into them a negative premise, because those questions I promise, going to keep you stuck.

And then what I really like to do is to find a powerful question that you can to consciously practice. Remember, all of this work is developing a skill. It is one thing to listen to me talk about this for 30 minutes in a podcast episode. It is another thing to start to practice this work. And so finding a

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powerful question that you want to consciously practice; maybe you want to write it down in the morning, maybe you want to have it as the background to your phone, maybe you want to write it on a sticky and put it somewhere where you'll see it. Something to start to build it into your mind. Build it into a new neural pathway.

So I will tell you, the one that I love so much is, "What is this situation teaching me?" I think that is such a great powerful question, because especially you know, those moments when you're in the line in the grocery store and you're just tapping your foot and hands on your hips and ready to get out of there, you ask yourself, "What is this situation teaching me?", let me tell you, your brain is going to want to try and find an answer, and it's not going to be the kind of automatic response that you would get from, "Why is this taking so long?"

And it's also really powerful when you start to use it in the work that you're doing to change your drinking. To examine the things that you are using to numb, or examine what you're feeling at the end of the day, why you're struggling to not pour yourself a drink. You can ask yourself, "What is this situation teaching me? What am I learning here?" because there's always something to learn.

So that's it for today. Pay attention to your questions. This I will tell you, is so often a reason why so many of my clients come to me and they're stuck because they're asking themselves these dead-end questions, or they just don't even recognize, they're not even aware of how negative their answers are to even neutral questions. So if you have any questions about this, you can always email me at podcast@rachelhart.com. Otherwise, I will talk to you next week. Bye-bye.

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

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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.