

Ep #60: Augmenting Positive Emotions



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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 60.

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, I'm going to start off today with a story that I have from one of my clients. So I've been working with this woman for a while, and one of the things that we've been talking about is you know, really understanding how the think-feel-act cycle applies to how she shows up at work.

You know, because the think-feel-act cycle applies to everything. Not just drinking. Everything, everywhere in our lives, all of our relationships, there it is. So she had been preparing for this presentation and it was a presentation that she had anxiety about. She had some stress about it, but she had been doing a lot of work to prepare and to go in with a different mindset and to show up differently by using the think-feel-act cycle, by paying attention to what she was thinking and feeling, and working to shift that on purpose.

So she gave this presentation and it went really well. The presentation went really well. She was really happy and she was telling me about this. She was telling me about this victory that she had at work for something that she had worried about for a while.

And one of the things that she related was that when she was driving home from work that day, she watched and instead of her brain automatically searching for a reward, which so many of us are in the habit of doing, right? Something good happens and we're immediately like, "How can I celebrate? Am I going to have a drink? Am I going to eat something? Are we going to go out to a restaurant?" Right?

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We're so often in that place of something positive happening and then looking, waiting, anticipating that coming reward, but instead she just allowed herself to be present with what she was feeling. She allowed herself to really go in to and really feel and savor those positive emotions, to really understand, what does pride feel like? What does victory feel like? What am I experiencing right now?

And it was a totally different experience for her because instead of anticipating this reward of dopamine from food or alcohol to celebrate her accomplishment, she just allowed herself to be present with all the positive emotions that she was experiencing. And we talked about how different that was, how different it is to allow yourself to fully experience a positive emotion rather than immediately focusing on, "Okay, have a positive emotion, how am I going to get some dopamine to augment it?" Where's that real reward going to come from?

And that's what I want to talk to you guys about today. I want you to really understand what happens when we savor a positive emotion, what happens when we immediately rush to augment it, when we are turning to dopamine, usually in the form of food or alcohol, or buying ourselves something, to augment that positive emotion. Why we want to do that in the first place, right? Why do we want to improve upon our positive emotions and what we're teaching our brains when we do?

So that's what we're going to be focusing on. I talk all the time about using alcohol and using drink and the dopamine reward that your brain gets is a way to numb or turn down the volume on negative emotions. And so you've heard me talk about that a lot in the podcast.

But I have gotten this question over and over from people. "Well, Rachel, what about when I turn to a drink because I'm feeling good? What about when I'm celebrating, when I'm happy? You know, when it's cozy? What about that? Is that a problem?"

Now, you might guess that my response will be the same response I always give, do you like the results you are getting? That is the first and

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most important place for all of you to focus. I'm not going to tell you whether or not it is a problem, but I do want you to understand what is happening in your brain when you do this.

So that's the first question. Do you like the results you are getting then you augment positive emotions with the concentrated reward of dopamine that you get from drinking? So let's talk about what happens and why we get in the habit of doing that so that you can understand that for yourself and then decide if you like the results you're getting.

Now, I'm always asking all of you to really tune into what's happening when you experience a negative emotion in your body. What does it really feel like? What are those physical sensations? This is a new and foreign, and often times, difficult concept for a lot of you. It was for me too because that is not where I'm used to going.

When I was feeling a negative emotion, where I immediately went to was my head. "I hate this, this is terrible. When is it going to go away? Why do I always feel like this?" I immediately started spinning on my thoughts. What I was not used to paying attention to was okay, when you're feeling anxious, when I'm feeling insecure, when I'm feeling lonely, what's actually happening?

I'm telling myself it's terrible, it's terrible, it's terrible, I hate feeling this way, but what do I actually hate about it? Because when you start to tune in to the physical sensations that happen when you are experiencing any emotion, what you notice is that they may not match up. In fact, I would argue they really never match up with our thoughts about the emotion.

So when we tune in, we might notice that our chest is tightening and that our breathing is shallow. We might feel tension or pressure in different parts of our body. But when you start to really understand that, then you can have a conversation around, okay, is this something I have to immediately cover up? Is it something I have to immediately move away from? Do I have to pour myself a drink or eat something in order to give my

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brain dopamine so I don't have to experience my chest tightening, or tension in my muscles?

So I'm talking about this a lot with you guys, but what I haven't talked as much about is, hey, well, what happens when you feel a positive emotion? Because you feel that in your body as well. Your chest expands, your breathing deepens, your muscles may relax, you may feel warmth, you may feel tingling, pleasant tingling sensations, or goose bumps. You have all these very pleasant physical sensations happening, but my guess, because it was true for me is that you are not used to really tuning in to either what your negative emotions feel like in your body, or what your positive emotions feel like in your body.

And if you don't know what your positive emotions feel like, well, how can you possibly savor them? How can you possibly really be with them? You know, what that client of mine was talking about was such a different shift for her. So she had this victory at work and she felt satisfied, she felt proud, she felt victorious, and she was able to actually really feel those emotions, really be present with them instead of having her attention turned, her attention elsewhere, focusing on anticipating how she was going to reward herself with dopamine.

When you savor anything, but a positive emotion, what you're doing is you are immersing yourself fully in it. You are allowing yourself to plunge into the experience. It is washing over you. You are fully engrossed and absorbed in feeling how that positive emotion feels in your body.

When your brain immediately turns to look for a reward, when you immediately turn to like, where am I going to get dopamine to augment what you are experiencing, you can't possibly savor it. Because your attention is pulled away from your body, it's pulled away from that present moment and it's in the future, waiting for that "better something" to come along. We cannot savor our positive emotions if our attention is elsewhere.

So I want you to really think about that. So something really good is happening, you are feeling a positive emotion, which listen, every single

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person that I talk to says they want more of. "I just want to feel better. I just want to feel happier. I just want to feel calmer. I just want to feel proud of myself." Every single person I talk to says they want it, but then the immediate reaction in the brain is to move away from it, and to start thinking about, "How can I get that concentrated reward of dopamine?"

And I think that's a really important piece to understand. We say we want more positive emotions but then we're always looking to augment them with dopamine. And here's the thing: when you augment something, what you're doing is you are adding something, in this case, dopamine, in order to improve or complete it.

You're adding something in order to improve or complete something else. Now, my question is this: in the case of your positive emotions, why do we believe that they need improving or completing? Why on earth are we telling ourselves that they are incomplete or lacking just as they are?

You know, I actually have heard from multiple people - I cannot tell you, I wish that this was my case. I do not have this situation. I hear from multiple people, they say, "You know what, in the evenings, what I do, I sit outside with my partner on our porch and we watch the sunset together with a glass of wine."

Now listen, I so wish this was my case. I do not have a porch or a good vantage point to see the sunset. So I want you to imagine yourself in these situations. Because people will say, "This is my habit, this is our routine, this is what we do, and now I'm trying to take a break and I don't have that glass of wine and it kind of stinks."

So I want you to imagine that this is you and you're sitting on a porch watching the sunset and you have all these thoughts about how stunning the colors are and how peaceful it is and how lucky you are, and your thoughts are creating all these emotions of gratitude, joy, wonder, awe.

But now let's say that you're always - you're habitually adding a glass of wine to augment those emotions and that experience. You are adding

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dopamine to the gratitude, joy, wonder. And imagine that this becomes your regular habit. Guess what's going to happen - when you take that glass of wine away, suddenly you are sitting on your porch looking at the same sunset, sitting there with your partner, but something feels wrong. This isn't as much fun. You don't enjoy it as much. Something is missing.

I want you to really think about that. Suddenly, just because you've gotten into the habit of adding dopamine to augment positive emotions, when it's just you and your positive emotions minus the dopamine, all of a sudden you're like, "This isn't so good. I don't like it so much." Right?

But you have done - I want you to really think about this. What you have done is you have turned down the volume on gratitude, joy, and wonder. And suddenly those emotions have been dampened. They feel a bit lackluster because you are so used to experiencing them and then adding dopamine to augment them.

So I want you to really think about this. Why are humans in such a rush to augment everything? And why in the world do we ever want to put ourselves in the position where we have gotten into the habit of having a glass of wine or drinking whenever we feel a positive emotion so that then when we don't, those positive emotions don't feel as good? Right? The volume has been turned down on them.

I think the problem is that so many of us have no idea, we have no clue because no one teaches us how to be with any emotion, much less a positive one. How to truly feel it, how to savor it. And so what we're constantly rushing to do is either numb the negative emotions that we're so sure we can't tolerate feeling, or rushing to augment the positive emotions that we're so sure need improving because we're so disconnected from our bodies.

And I'll tell you this: look, I don't ever want to experience the sunset and be sitting there and be like, "You know what, I just feel like something's missing. It's lovely, but you know, it's a little lackluster." Right? So if you heard episode 32, this is the episode where I'm talking all about the habit

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cycle, and in it, I talk about going to see a solar eclipse last summer in Jackson, Wyoming. And I'll tell you, I mean, if you listen to it, it blew my mind. Literally, I was like, "Guys, this is magic."

I was in total awe and wonderment at what was happening. It was like, the coolest thing I had ever seen and it was - I mean, I was expecting something good, but it was way beyond what I expected. And I remember when I was there, we were with a group of people because there were a lot of people out in Jackson who all were watching the solar eclipse.

And I remember someone offered me a screwdriver, and I said no, obviously, but my brain was like - I remember at that moment, my brain was like - it was slightly dumbfounded. I was like, "Wait, what? Guys, magic is about to happen. Like, what - why are you drinking? Don't - do not miss out on the magic."

And so now keep in mind, you know, if you've never seen a solar eclipse before, you know, it started in the morning. It started around 10, if I remember correctly, and solar eclipses, they don't happen in a split second. It took about three hours from start to finish. And you know, I wanted to be out there and I want to see the whole thing, and so I was sitting there and I was just listening to these people that I was with getting kind of progressively more and more drunk. And it was fascinating because you know, here I was, sitting there, and I was having such an intense emotional positive - positive emotional experience, you know, without any dopamine, and I was so - I was kind of quiet and I was just so fully in it in what I was experiencing, and just how magical I thought everything was.

And then I was with this group and you know, a bunch of them were drinking screwdrivers, kind of, one after another, and they were really chatty and they were really laughing, and I remember being like, "God, our two experiences are so different." And when the eclipse was over, I remember everybody kind of rushed to move on. Like, that whole kind of group was like, "Okay, done, over with," and they were headed back inside.

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And I wanted to be like, "Guys, hello, can we like, talk about what just happened? My mind is blown. It was incredible." Like, I was still feeling it so intensely, and I felt like I had this kind of positive buzz going on in my body, not just you know, an hour after, like, that whole day and days after. It just - it felt so strong to me. And everybody was just like, packing up so quickly, moving on to the next thing, and I remember at the time I didn't really get it.

But you know, as I think back on it now and I remember day drinking, I remember especially, you know, weekends in New York City, if I would go out to brunch and start with a mimosa. Right? If like, the day drinking didn't keep going, I would feel terrible by the time afternoon rolled around. Do you remember this? Right?

It was like you had to keep your day drinking going, you had to keep that buzz going otherwise you got into this just kind of like, ugh, gross, groggy, headache-y feeling. At least that's what would happen to me. And so it was fascinating to have this experience and watch these people experiencing the exact same thing but one, feeling like they needed to augment it and two, that you know, it didn't seem like the experience lasted as long for them.

I don't know, it was really fascinating for me. You know, but I'll tell you, listen, a couple years ago, when I was in the habit of augmenting all my positive emotions, I would have been the first person to be like, "Yes, screwdrivers." We're sitting outside for three hours to watch the sun, right? Like, obviously we need something else to help this along, right?

So don't get me wrong, I would have been the first person to augment my positive emotions because I was not used to tuning into them either. I was much more into anticipating the dopamine that was going to come. Really, I mean, I was really all just about the dopamine.

So I mean, the question that I get on this is like, "Well, okay Rachel, well, what's the problem? Like, we're all adults. If it's legal, it feels good, like, why not augment? Why not make things better? Why not have positive emotions and improve them?" And I think that's a really good question.

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But what I want to ask you first is do you really know what you're trying to augment and complete and improve upon in the first place? Are you really so tuned in to your positive emotions that you're like, "Yeah, let's make it better. Joy and awe and wonder and gratitude and contentment, they're okay. But I need to amp them up."

So like, if you really believe that you're totally tuned into them and augmentation is the way you want to go, cool. But my guess is because I know so many of you are not used to tuning in to your negative emotions, that I'm sure you're not tuning in, you're not savoring your positive emotions as well. Because I certainly didn't know how to do either. I didn't know how to tune in to anything when it came to an emotion in my body.

And the second thing to consider is, you know what, augmentation does not come without costs. There is a downside. And listen, here's the thing, those downsides may be worth it to you, and that's totally okay. But just know that they're there. So when you are having a drink, your body then has to deal with it, so you're going to have to deal with the resulting dehydration, maybe a little headache-y, maybe a little fuzziness or fogginess, the extra calories. Your body has to go on a mission to then deal with the alcohol that you put into its body.

So there is that potential downside. But I do think there's also the downside of what habitually augmenting positive emotions does to your overall experience of positive emotions. Do they feel as good if you're always used to reaching to something to try to improve upon them or make them better?

I think they don't. I think a lot of time what happens is you're like these people that I talk to watching the sunset that are like, "I don't know, just don't enjoy the sunset as much." Right? And I'm just like, "That sucks. Why would I want to be in that situation?"

And here's the crazy thing that's happened since taking a break. I feel like all my positive emotions have been totally amped up. Isn't that nuts? And I will tell you, I was not expecting this. I didn't think going in like, hey, you

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know, things in life are going to feel so much better. That was not what I thought going into it.

I had no idea that it was going to feel as if - I don't know, like, someone had just turned way up all my positive emotions because I learned to actually savor them. I learned how to actually be present with them. I learned how to be in the moment instead of anticipating some sort of future reward to improve upon them.

So when I decided to take a break, I was forced to pay attention to what my negative emotions felt like in my body because that's what I was so often using alcohol to move away from was that negative emotion. But doing so taught me how to really pay attention to those positive emotions in my body as well. I had no idea that I was teaching myself to do this skill, and it's such a great skill to have.

So the other thing, because I wasn't always looking for a reward with a drink, I could be fully present with what was happening. I wasn't anticipating something to come. My brain wasn't in this future moment where things are going to be even better. I was in this moment, the current moment, and it was great.

And you know what, I think about all the moments that in my life in the last couple of years that in the past I would have definitely been like, "Yeah, let's celebrate with a drink," right? I definitely would have been augmenting a positive emotion.

I think about the birth of my first niece and nephew, you know, I took the plunge and left my job at New York City to start a business, I got engaged, I published a book, I got married, we went on a honeymoon, I launched a podcast, I got certified as a master life coach, and I hit my first big financial goal as an entrepreneur. All of those things in the past would have definitely been like, "Yes, augment, let's do it." Right?

And I think like, I just was able to savor all the positive emotions that came with these moments, and I will tell you, I truly feel like my emotions are

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supercharged. I feel my positive emotions so much more intensely because I'm really in the moment. I'm really savoring them. I'm fully engrossed, they're washing over me. My attention isn't elsewhere. I'm not waiting for, "Okay, when am I going to get that drink so I can really celebrate?"

And that to me, that to me, that ability to really savor your positive emotions, I think that that is the real reward. So many of us don't know how to do that. I didn't know how to do that for the longest time. But I will tell you that there is a huge reward in that.

So you know, is it a problem to augment your positive emotions? Is it a problem to look to improve upon or complete them? Well, the first question is do they really need improvement or completion? And I don't think it's necessarily a problem if you decide to do this. Of course, my focus is for you always to ask, do you like the results that you're getting, and you may like the results that you're getting.

But I do want you to understand what you're teaching your brain, and if you habitually are looking to augment your positive emotions, you will, I promise, at some point, start to feel like there is something missing from them, especially if you ever take that drink away, or food. People do the same thing with food.

I don't want you to feel like anything is missing from joy, wonder, awe, pride, love, gratitude, excitement. I don't want you to feel like any of those emotions are lackluster or less than. You know, because suddenly these are moments that are so amazing. These moments that we say we want more of, these feelings that we say we want more of, suddenly it's like they don't measure up because the brain is so used to drinking and eating as the real celebration, the real reward. Getting that concentrated form of dopamine that all of these amazing emotions just don't seem amazing on their own anymore.

And here's the thing: if you either want to take a break or you are taking a break right now, you will have to go through a readjustment period. I did

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too. You're going to have to teach your brain what it's like to experience this emotion without rewarding it with food or drink.

And at first, your brain will tell you that something is missing. But once your brain learns that it's not going to get the reward, it will calm down and that's when you can start to learn how to really dive into the positive emotion.

Now, you cannot do this if you just move from one reward to like, and we're having champagne. Let's crack open the bottle to another reward. Like, where's the ice cream? Where's the chocolate cake? You have to be able to just allow yourself, just like my client did, allow yourself to be totally into what is happening, totally into that positive emotion instead of being focused elsewhere.

If your attention is elsewhere, it's on getting that some type of reward, you cannot truly savor what you are experiencing. But if you learn to do this, what I promise is this: you will discover that there is so much more joy, so much more wonder, so much more awe, so much more contentment, more gratitude, more love to experience.

The positive emotion that you are experiencing right now, I promise, it is just the tip of the iceberg because I guarantee that you are not fully in it. You are not fully savoring it.

When I decided that I was going to take a break from drinking, and I was going to really use this time to understand the habit and understand why I had so much desire and why I felt so deprived and like I was missing out when I didn't have a glass in my hand, I believed that I was headed towards a life that would be healthier. And I believed that I was headed towards a life that would be free of regret and embarrassment from having had too much to drink the night before.

But I had no clue. I didn't even understand that this was on the horizon, that I was headed to something so much better. And the reason that is, the reason it is that it feels like my positive emotions are supercharged and are way better than any dopamine is because I have learned how to fully be in

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them. And I will promise you, there is no downside to that. There is no downside to just savoring joy and wonder and awe and contentment and gratitude and love, and whatever else positive emotions there are out there.

So think about that. Think about today, why you're looking to celebrate, whether or not you actually believe this is positive emotion isn't enough, is somehow incomplete or missing something, needs to be improved upon, and whether or not you actually want to learn how to just savor that positive emotion. Because I tell you, it's so, so, so worth it.

Alright everybody, as always, if you have questions, if you would like me to talk about a specific issue on the podcast, just drop me a line at podcast@rachelhart.com. Otherwise, I will see you guys 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.

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