

Ep #64: Urges 2.0



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With Your Host

Rachel Hart

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Ep #64: Urges 2.0

You are listening to the *Take a Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, episode 64.

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 talking about urges today. Now listen, I've already done an entire podcast episode, it was episode number eight on managing urges. It was one of the first podcasts that I did because of course, how you manage an urge, what you do with an urge makes a ton of difference when you're trying to take a break or change your drinking.

So what I want to do today is dig in a little bit deeper. So in addition to understanding how to manage your urges, I want to give you a new way to think about them, a new framework to think about the urge itself that I think will be very helpful as you're doing this work.

So the urge to drink, and frankly, the urge to do anything is just desire that has been habituated, right? Desire that your brain has learned to expect at certain times, certain places, certain events, certain activities, when you are doing certain things, when you are feeling certain emotions, that's what the urge is all about. And you can feel urges around lots of things, not just drinking.

So in episode eight where I'm talking about managing urges, I go into the four things you can do when the urge to drink appears. And again, this applies to all urges. You can react, you can resist, you can distract, and you can observe. These are the four things you can do when the urge to drink appears.

Now, I'm going to break these down for you. Reacting to an urge, as you may have guessed, is just pouring yourself a drink. It's going out and getting the thing that you want. That's what reacting means. Now, a lot of

[Take a Break from Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #64: Urges 2.0

people when they start to try to change the habit, they start to do the next two options: resist or distract, or some combination of the two.

Resisting an urge looks like willpower. It's that gritting your teeth, that sense of like, "Go away, go away, go away. No, no, no, no." That's resisting. You're kind of fighting against it being there. Takes a lot of energy, and I talk about this a lot, why resisting can be a problem.

Now, distracting is a little bit different. Distracting is let's see if I can busy myself with something else. And it may look like busying yourself in cleaning the house, it may look like distracting yourself by avoiding certain situations, or it may look like turning to a different reward. I've got the urge to drink, but I'm going to eat something instead. It's a way to try to distract yourself from that initial urge.

So that's react, resist, and distract, but the fourth thing you can do is observe. You can just look at the urge and allow it to be there without answering it. Now, this is the one that can change everything, and this is the one that so many of you are struggling with. How do I observe that urge? How do I just allow it to be there? Because we don't have a lot of practice around that.

But once you develop this kind of practice, it's really incredible how it can just transform everything because there's a problem with the first three, the first three things that you can do when you feel an urge. When you react, when you say yes, you're just fueling the habit cycle. The more you feel the urge to drink and then say yes to the urge to drink, the more you're giving yourself a reward and the stronger and more ingrained the habit becomes.

So the more you react, the more you're fueling that habit cycle, the stronger and more ingrained the habit becomes. Resisting, like I mentioned, is exhausting. It takes so much energy. And when you're resisting, when you're fighting against something I mean, I always think of it and the image of like, closing your eyes and balling up your hands in a fist and kind of tensing your whole body up.

Ep #64: Urges 2.0

When you're doing that, you can't see the habit cycle. You can't see the thoughts that are fueling your desire because the only thing you're concentrating on is saying no. So you never get the information you need to see what is driving the habit in the first place. And it's kind of like holding your breath, right? You can only do it for so long before it's just too hard. And that's what happens for a lot of people when they are resisting.

They get to the point where they're just like, saying no, saying no, saying no, and the habit itself isn't changing. Their desire isn't changing. They're just saying no, saying no, saying no, and they finally say like, "I can't do this anymore. It's too hard. Just got to give in." This is what happened to me over and over and over again when I was flip-flopping in between drinking and not drinking. I would resist and resist and resist and then couldn't do it, couldn't deal with it. Just got to give in.

Now, distracting is the one that most people come to me and say like, "Is it really so wrong? Is it really such a problem if I'm distracting myself?" But I'll tell you, it can create several problems. Problem number one is if your mode of distraction or your method of distraction is turning to another reward. So a lot of people do this around food. They feel the desire to drink and they don't want to say yes to that desire, but they're like, "Well, what if I say yes to kind of this other desire? What if I eat something sweet? What if I have some candy?"

So you're still saying yes to the urge for a reward, it's just being fulfilled in a different way. And here's the thing: you might have much less negative consequences from eating when you feel a desire versus drinking, but you're still not changing the habit cycle. You're still feeling an urge and rewarding it. The habit itself hasn't changed how it's working. It's just switched up its rewards.

And you know, for a lot of people it can cause a whole new set of problems. Nobody wants to be in a situation where they're like, "Well, one of the reasons why I didn't want to keep drinking the way that I'm drinking is because I don't like the health consequences, and now I'm putting on all

[Take a Break from Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #64: Urges 2.0

this weight, but at least I'm not drinking." That's one of the problems with distracting.

The other problem is when you turn to avoiding situations or making yourself so busy you can't see how the habit cycle is working to change it. You can't change what you can't see. So if you immediately throw yourself into isolating, "Well, I'm just never going to be around alcohol, I'm never going to that party. I'm going to turn down all these invites," or if you throw yourself into busying yourself, "I'm just going to work, work, work, work, work, become a master at my to-do list," what happens is that you never end up seeing the thoughts that are driving the habit. And you can't see the thoughts, then you can't change the habit itself.

So then when you understand the problems behind resisting, reacting, and distracting, you start to see, okay, well maybe there needs to be a different way, and that different way is observing. But how do you do this? How do you observe an urge?

So one of the things that I did in episode 34 is I actually offered up an urge meditation to help teach you how to do this. And like all emotions, you feel urges in your body, right? The way that you know that you're having an urge is you're feeling something in your body. And that's what that meditation is trying to do is trying to shift your attention from your thoughts, all the thoughts, all the excuses, all the thoughts creating desire, "I need it, I need a break, just one, it won't matter, who cares?" to shift your attention away from that and see what's happening your body.

And everyone comes to me initially and they're like, "Ugh, urges are terrible, they're so uncomfortable, I don't want to feel them." That's sort of the baseline premise where most people start. And so that meditation is to help really look at what exactly is so terrible, what exactly is so uncomfortable about the urge to drink.

Now, here's what happens: so many people come back to me and they're like, "Okay, so I think I might be doing the meditation wrong because I didn't feel that much there. I didn't find a lot happening in my body," but

[Take a Break from Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #64: Urges 2.0

here's the thing, that's the beauty of observing an urge. When you really look at what it feels like in your body, it does not match up with the language that you have in your head. The language about it being unbearable or impossible to say no to, yeah, you feel a little restless, right? A little antsy maybe when you have that urge and you're not fulfilling it, but it's not the end of the world.

But most people, it so doesn't match up with the thoughts in their head about, "I hate urges, it's unbearable, this is so uncomfortable," that when they tune into their body, they're like, "I think I might be doing something wrong." But you're not. The actual urge itself is not an emergency, but all your thoughts about it are.

Usually, what is more uncomfortable is not how the unanswered desire, that urge, feels in your body, but the thoughts going on in your head. "I want it, it's so unfair, I hate this feeling, everybody else is, it's Friday, I deserve it," right? Whatever it is, that is what's creating a lot of emotional discomfort for you.

But so today I want to dig deeper. I want to talk about a fantastic metaphor that my coach, Brooke Castillo uses for talking about urges, and I want to share it with you. Because you know I think that metaphors are incredibly powerful on the path to change. I actually did a whole episode, episode 45 talking about metaphors and how you can harness metaphors and make them work for you, make them be incredibly helpful in the think-feel-act cycle.

So in that podcast episode, I talked about how one of my clients described saying no to an urge was like wearing an itchy sweater. So she had the desire to drink, she had that urge, and when she would say no to it, when she wouldn't answer it, it was kind of like an itchy sweater. And that metaphor incredibly shifted her perspective because instead of being like, "Oh my god, this is terrible, I can't do it," she was able to look at it differently. She was able to say no to an urge and see it as like, "Yeah, it's like wearing an itchy sweater. It's not my favorite thing in the world, it's a

Ep #64: Urges 2.0

little uncomfortable, a little scratchy, I'm kind of moving around, but it's not something I have to freak out about.

And I think that that metaphor that she came up with really gets at the feeling behind the urge. That feeling of restlessness, that feeling of being antsy, of wanting to have something, to do something. It's that feeling of expectation, it's like you want to scratch an itch. But the metaphor I'm going to share with you today and the metaphor that I learned from Brooke is a little different because what it helps you understand is the mechanism behind why that urge is there and exists in the first place.

So first, I want you to consider that you have an adult and a toddler in your brain. Now, you've heard me talk about some of these ideas before. The adult is the prefrontal cortex. It's that higher part of your brain, the part of your brain that can weight pros and cons and think about the future and plan, and set goals, and help you evolve. It really is the most evolved part of your brain.

Now, there's also a toddler. That toddler is the lower brain, the more primitive brain. What that toddler cares about is finding pleasure, avoiding pain. The toddler does not care about pros and cons, it does not care about the future, it does not care about tomorrow or your plans or your goals or evolving. That is not the toddler's domain. The toddler's domain is immediate and instant gratification. "Who cares about the pros and cons? Let's just feel good."

So think about that. There's the adult, the prefrontal cortex, and the toddler, the lower brain. You have both. We all have both. Now remember, you weren't born with the desire to drink. We don't come out of the womb with a desire to drink. You taught your brain to want the reward in certain situations, when you are feeling certain emotions, when you are with certain people, when you're doing certain things. You taught your brain to desire alcohol, to want the reward.

And that desire to drink, the urge that you feel is always caused by a thought. Now, a lot of you may say like, "It feels like there's no thought

[Take a Break from Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #64: Urges 2.0

even there. Like, it just appears." And the reason is because it has been habituated. When you have a habit, that is your brain trying to be super-efficient, trying to create the ability to take an action and be unconscious. And habits are very fast, that's what makes them very efficient. But when we're trying to change them, we're like, "I don't know, I'm not even sure there's a thought there."

Trust me. The desire to drink is always created by a thought, even if you feel like there isn't one right now. There is one because you had to teach your brain to want the reward. You had to teach your brain to expect it in certain situations. This desire wasn't always with you, it learned it somehow.

And the thoughts can be as simple as, "That looks good. Why not? I need a break. I love wine. It tastes good. Everybody else it, it's a party. It's a celebration," whatever it is. "It's free." Right? There is a thought there creating your desire because alcohol just sits there. It just sits there. it doesn't do anything. It can't make you pick it up. It can't create desire until you start thinking about it, thinking about what it's going to do for you.

Remember, that's how the think-feel-act cycle works. Your thoughts create your feelings, which drive your actions. And the action, of course, is picking up the bottle of alcohol, having a drink. In this case, your thoughts about alcohol, what you think about it creates your desire, which drives the action of drinking. But you repeat this enough and soon you have a habit, and it feels like all there is is action. You don't even notice the thought.

The desire feels so fast. It just seems like there's just action there but those three parts always exist. You repeated this pattern enough that taught your brain to expect rewards at certain times in certain places, with certain people, when you feel certain emotions. And that expectation of the reward is the urge. The urge is desire habituated.

So here's the thing. When you feel the urge to drink, you can do any number of things, like I already mentioned. You can react, you can resist, you can distract, or you can observe. Now, most of you have tons of

[Take a Break from Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #64: Urges 2.0

practice reacting, right? That's how you got the habit. Feel the urge, go get a drink. Feel the urge, go get a drink. Feel the urge, go get a drink. Learn those. I had tons of practice reacting.

But a lot of you, and I also had this as well, had practice resisting, saying no over and over and over again. And I also had a lot of practice distracting, and you may too. Not socializing, avoiding people, avoiding bars, avoiding parties, isolating myself. And this was what was so frustrating. I was trying over and over and over again to change the habit, I really felt like I was working very hard, and frankly, I was working pretty hard because I was using so much willpower.

But I didn't know that the resisting and the distracting were actually working against me. I didn't understand that as long as I resisted, as long as I distracted, I couldn't see how the habit was working. And I had no idea that there was a fourth option. I didn't know that you could just allow an urge to be there. You didn't need to push it away, you didn't need to run, hide from it, you could just feel the feeling. You could just feel what it's like to want something and not have it.

That doesn't sound so terrible. I wanted something and I didn't have it. And if you allow yourself to feel that, then you can see the thoughts behind the habit, what's creating the desire in the first place, and then you can change them.

Observing allows you to watch it, to allow it, and that's how you start to change it. And here's where the metaphor of the adult and the toddler come in. So I want you to imagine that every time you went to the grocery store, you brought your little toddler along, and you gave her a piece of candy. And after a while, the toddler brain will realize, "Hey, when we're at the grocery store, this is great, I get candy."

And soon that toddler will be expecting a piece of candy every time you went. She would be babbling about the candy on the car ride over. Now, here's the thing: maybe it worked for a while. You were shopping, the

Ep #64: Urges 2.0

toddler really wanted to do other things, so you could keep her occupied with some candy.

Everybody was happy. But as you did this more and more, you started to notice, "I don't really like the results that I'm getting." She's always incessantly asking when is she going to get it, when is she going to get it, and frankly, it's a lot of sugar. Maybe I don't want her to have that much sugar. So you're starting to notice the negative results. You're starting to notice how this toddler is so fixated on the candy every time you go to the grocery store.

Now listen, she didn't create that for herself. You created it for her. And maybe at first, she was happy with one bag of M&Ms, but maybe then she wanted more and more and soon, she's talking about candy all the time. And so here's the good news. You're the adult, and you get to be like, "Hey, enough is enough. It's not good for you. I don't like all the whining, I don't like how fixated you are on it, I don't like how much sugar it is, I don't like how you act after the sugar crash, so no more candy when we go to the grocery store."

Now listen, guess what's going to happen the first time you try to enforce this? This kid is going to lose her mind. She's going to freak out, she's going to throw a tantrum. She's going to be like, "What are you talking about? We are at the grocery store, this is what we do every time before. Every other time you have given me a piece of candy. I've been expecting candy on the whole ride over. I want my candy."

And this is what's happening with our lower brain. This is a toddler inside of us when we try to change the habit of drinking, which has such a strong reward attached to it. We use our adult brain, our prefrontal cortex to decide like, "Hey, I don't think this is working. I don't think I like the results that I'm getting, I don't like how I feel in the morning. I feel like there are better things, other things that I want to be doing, I want to be working on, I want to be spending my time on. Drinking every night when I get home, drinking too much when I go out, the negative consequences, it's all starting to mount. I think I want to change this."

[Take a Break from Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #64: Urges 2.0

So that adult, that prefrontal cortex decides, "Listen, I'm going to try to change the habit. I'm going to decide that sometimes we're going to say no because I've got dreams, I've got goals, and I care about my future." And here's the thing: saying no is the easy part. It really is. The toddler asks for candy and you, the adult, say no. That part is simple. The difficult part is what happens next.

What happens next is that toddler, that lower brain that you have conditioned, you have taught to expect to receive a reward at certain times, throws a fit. She screams, she cries, she throws herself on the floor. Not only that, like, people are looking. This is the difficult part. Saying no to the urge to drink is easy. The difficult part is dealing with the discomfort when you don't comply with your brain's expectation that it is supposed to get a reward.

This is what so many of you find so difficult to deal with. How the urge actually feels in your body, that's restlessness. But everything that's happening in your mind, all your thoughts, that's where the tantrum is taking place. That toddler is demanding action, she is demanding candy. But here's the good news: she has no authority. She's got no money, she doesn't even know how money works.

She has absolutely zero authority in this situation. Now, she thinks she has a lot of authority, she can scream and cry, try to get her way, but there is an adult there that is calling the shots. That is your prefrontal cortex. Your prefrontal cortex is the adult in your brain that can supervise that toddler, your lower brain.

Now, the problem is that a lot of you, the lower brain starts freaking out, the toddler is throwing a tantrum and you're like, "Listen, I can't deal with this crazy kid, she will not stop. It is embarrassing, people are looking, I hate the screaming. I just want her to stop." And here's the thing: it is always so much easier to give in than to say yes. But here's the thing: you also know what will happen if you keep saying yes. She is just going to get more and more insistent.

Ep #64: Urges 2.0

So then you decide, "Okay, well, I'm just going to walk away from her." But she keeps following. So you try to ignore her, but she's still there. Maybe you even yell back at her, right? Toddler's screaming, you're screaming, and now both of you feel a boatload of negative emotion. It's exhausting.

So what happens? You finally relent and you give her the piece of candy. And now the toddler knows that throwing a fit is a really good way to get what she wants. That's what's happening for a lot of you. That tantrum is all the thoughts in your mind. "So unfair, why me? I really need it. Just one. Come on, it won't make a difference, no one will know." Your brain starts to see like, "These are the thoughts that I should think to get what I want."

That's what so many of you are doing when you decide to take a break from drinking. You say no, which is actually the easy part because it's easy to say no, but when that lower brain starts throwing a fit because you have taught the lower brain to expect a reward, you're like, "I can't deal with this." You decide that the immediate discomfort isn't worth it, and then you go have that drink.

But of course, the immediate discomfort is the path. It's always this way. What feels like the obstacle is of course, always the path. Your ability to handle the discomfort of your brain not getting the reward it expects is exactly how you will change the habit.

Now listen, I know a lot of you are like, "Rachel, it's too hard. The discomfort is too much." But I want you to think back to that toddler in that grocery store. You say no, you say, "No listen, we're not doing the candy today," even if you gave it to her 20 times before. That toddler throws a fit, people are staring, she's screaming. Then what?

Here's the thing: if you don't give in, if you handle that discomfort of the toddler throwing a fit, eventually she's going to wear herself out because it is exhausting screaming and crying. And that's what the brain will do with the desire to drink, and that's why so many of you have started to recognize that if you get past a certain time in the evening, you're actually

[Take a Break from Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #64: Urges 2.0

golden because your brain seems to quiet down. Your brain's like, "Oh, I guess we're not doing that tonight."

Because remember, that lower brain, that toddler doesn't just care about seeking pleasure and avoiding pain. The lower brain also cares about being efficient, about saving energy, and throwing a fit is never efficient. Once the brain realizes it isn't going to get a reward, it closes up shop. And this is how you start to retrain your brain. You say no to desire, you allow the urge to be there, but you don't react, you don't resist, you don't distract.

You listen to all the pleas from the toddler, "Just one, I promise I won't ask for more, everyone else is, you've always done it before, it's not fair, I need it," but because you're an adult, you just answer back to those excuses. The toddler can throw a fit, but you're the adult, you can always outlast her. And eventually, if you start doing that, she will start to learn that going to the grocery store does not equal getting a piece of candy.

I think about this with my own brain a lot. My lower brain, my toddler, oh my lord, she had so many excuses. "Rachel, it's Friday, it's a party, you got a promotion, it's your birthday, it's a wedding, you need it. Everyone else is. This is so awkward, just have a drink. It doesn't matter, who cares? Screw it."

I had trained my brain to expect rewards in so many instances, but by just allowing that urge to be there and not gritting my teeth, not freaking out, not running away, not yelling back, I was able to retrain my brain and teach it that the reward wasn't coming because I was able to see all those thoughts that were fueling the habit cycle and answer them back. And eventually, the urge extinguished itself.

Here's what I did. That toddler was throwing a fit and I just sat down right next to her. I didn't yell, I didn't grit my teeth, I didn't tell her to go away, and I didn't run away. I didn't pretend she wasn't there. I just sat down right next to her and I listened to her. I listened to all her pleas and all her excuses. And I learned that I could answer back to them because all of the things

Ep #64: Urges 2.0

that I had tried before, the resisting and the distracting, it couldn't help me unwind the habit.

I had to be able to listen. I had to see what was creating the habit in the first place. All her excuses, and just calmly reply to each one. I let her throw a fit. All the while knowing I was the adult, I was in charge, she could demand action all she wanted, but I was the only one who had authority. Saying no to a drink is easy. Dealing with the discomfort of an urge, that's what is difficult.

But the good news is your lower brain can demand and demand and expect and expect and want and want, but you still have authority. If you are willing to sit down next to that discomfort and not answer it, eventually, the discomfort will pass and your brain will have learned something new, and that is how you change the habit.

Alright everybody, as always, if you have questions or would like to hear me talk about a specific thing on the podcast, send me a note at podcast@rachelhart.com. I hope you enjoyed this metaphor. I find it extremely, extremely helpful for this work, and frankly, any work where you trying to change a habit. Alright, I will 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-

[Take a Break from Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #64: Urges 2.0

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.