

Ep #66: Becoming an Observer



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Rachel Hart

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You are listening to the *Take a Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, episode 66.

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.

Alright guys, so listen, today we are going to be talking a really challenging but such a profound concept that I teach when it comes to how to change your drinking in a sustainable way, how to take a break in a sustainable way. But really, you can apply it to how to change anything in your life, and that concept is how to become an observer of your thoughts and your emotions.

And the reason why this is so profound is because if you can look at your thoughts and look at your emotions and be able to do that objectively and understand what they are creating for you, understand how you act and the results that you get, you can start to change them. Now, the problem is that most of us have zero practice doing this. No one ever sits us down and explains how we can become an observer of ourselves.

And on top of that, the majority of people out there, myself included for a very long time, see our thoughts, all the thinking we have in our head, it's just an objective understanding of the world around us. So not only that, we see those negative thoughts at just the truth, but also, we see our negative emotions as feelings that we need to escape. We don't ever learn how to parse out our thoughts about things from the facts and circumstances of what is happening around us. So we don't see how our opinions, our judgments, the meaning that we're making things mean, we don't understand how that's affecting us.

And we don't ever learn how to really understand our negative emotions as not these terrible things that we need to run from, but just a set of sensations that are happening in our body that's totally survivable. But

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really if you want to understand the habit of overdrinking and you want to change it, you have to learn how to do both of these things. It is so key.

Okay, so I'll tell you what happens when most people start to learn about the think-feel-act cycle. It makes a lot of sense, they enjoy having this framework to start to understand why they feel the way they do, why they do certain things, but they also become really good observers of other people. And so I have clients come back to me all the time, and they'll say, "You know what, I really see how this cycle is playing out with my husband. I really understand what my daughter is thinking then creates how she feels and how she acts."

And of course, the reason why this happens is because it's easier to see the cycle unfolding with other people rather than ourselves because when we're watching it happen with other people, we aren't in that moment of feeling the emotion they're feeling. We're not feeling angry or lonely or frustrated or bored or awkward. We're watching them feel that way.

And we're not in that space of believing our thoughts, believing our opinions, our judgments, our meanings that we apply to the world, we're not in that kind of stance of believing it as true. We can see how it might be optional. We're standing on the outside when it comes to observing how the cycle unfolds with another person and we're looking in.

But what I want you to do is to not just see how the think-feel-act cycle works in other people, I want you to learn how to develop this skill of how to observe it happening for you, how to become an observer for yourself.

Now, this is really one of the more difficult concepts in the work that I do to explain because it really is the ability to watch your thinking and emotions from a distance, and watching means that you're not immediately responding, you're not immediately having a knee-jerk reaction. You can see your thoughts and your feelings with a little bit of distance. You're able to observe it, you're able to watch carefully and attentively, to pay attention to detail, and to suspend your own judgment on what is happening and just look at it without making it mean anything about you.

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And this really is a very challenging but incredibly, incredibly powerful skill to develop. I often talk with people about the analogy of a merry-go-round. You know, I haven't been to one in years, but I remember when I was growing up in Connecticut, my parents would take my sister and I to Hartford and they would take us to ride the carousel in Bushnell Park.

And I think that the merry-go-round is such an apt analogy because I often ask people, "Listen, are you riding your own merry-go-round inside of yourself, or are you watching it?" And what I mean is this: I want you to imagine the carousel, imagine the merry-go-round, there's all these horses that you can ride, and think, those horses are thoughts. All the horses are different. Some are regal, some are plain, some are galloping, some are jumping, some are posing. You have all these horses to choose from. These are your thoughts.

And the movement of the merry-go-round, the platform is spinning, the horses are going up and down, there's music playing, all of that movement is your emotions. So you've got all these different thoughts and all these different emotions, and when it comes to the think-feel-act cycle, most of us are riding the merry-go-round. We are right in the thick of it. We're on a horse, the ride is spinning, the horse is going up and down, the music is playing, and we're totally immersed in the commotion of the ride.

We can see the outside world but from this really narrow vantage point because it keeps zipping past us. And sometimes maybe we can change a seat and we can see what another one is like, but nine times out of 10, everybody's just riding the merry-go-round. And what I want you to consider is that the merry-go-round can keep happening. You can keep having thoughts, you can keep having emotions, but you can step off of it.

You don't have to be right in the thick of it. You don't have to be right in the commotion of the ride. You can step off the merry-go-round and you can observe it happening from afar. Like, I think about my parents when they would take us to Bushnell Park in Hartford and they would have the two of us, they would put us on the ride but they would stand off and they would watch us from afar. They would watch us spinning around.

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That's what you can do with your thoughts and your emotions. With all that commotion, you can watch them. You can see them as a little external from you. You don't have to be riding the merry-go-round of your thinking and your emotions all day long. You can observe the horses and the music and the spinning, and you can stay outside of it.

This really is part of being the observer. And you know, this idea of being the observer, this idea of not being on the merry-go-round but stepping outside of it, watching it, just really comes from ideas from meditation, from a meditation practice.

Meditation, when we're sitting down on a cushion, closing our eyes, really paying attention to what we're thinking is this practice of watching our thoughts. Watching our thoughts and doing it in a compassionate way. Not judging them, not attaching to them, just seeing them as our thought. Seeing them as sentences in our mind that we don't have to attach to.

Now, here's the thing. For most of us, that's an incredibly, incredibly challenging skill because what happens for most people - so when they start paying attention to their thinking, they immediately start judging it. They immediately go, "God, I shouldn't think that. That's silly, that's stupid. I know better than that." We immediately start to judge the thoughts that are running through our mind.

But here's the thing. The thoughts are just a sentence. It's just a sentence in your mind. It's not some deep revealing insight into who you are as a person, and this piece is the hardest for most people. So many of us out there believe that our thoughts are reflections of who we are as a person. So we only want to have certain kinds of thoughts. We only want to have thoughts that are logical and ethical and kind.

And it doesn't work like that, right? It's not realistic. Sometimes I have thoughts that are unkind, and they are irrational, and they are immoral, and that's okay. And the reason that that is okay is because they're just sentences. They're just sentences in my mind. I don't have to act on them.

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Now listen, if you're not practicing being the observer, and you're just reacting to everything on the ride, yeah, then maybe you will act on some of these unkind, irrational, immoral thoughts. But if you're practicing just seeing them as a sentence in your mind, you can notice the thought, you can see what it will create for you, and you can decide if you want to keep it.

And here's the best thing that happens: the more you watch, the more you observe, the more you train yourself to see your thinking, just sentences in your mind, and see your emotions, just sensations in your body that you don't need to hide from, you don't need to escape from, the more you teach yourself not to have knee-jerk reactions, not to be on that merry-go-round but to watch it from a distance.

Right now, for most of you, your think-feel-act cycles are just playing out unconsciously. They are outside of your awareness but they are still unfolding. So something will happen and we won't even notice the thought. We won't even notice the feeling. We'll just go straight into reaction. Think about a car, cuts you off in traffic, and immediately you swear at the other driver and give them the finger, right? Immediately you're in that place of action.

You didn't notice the thought, you didn't notice the feeling, you just went right to the action. And a lot of times people will say, "I don't even think there's a thought there, Rachel. I don't even notice anything, it just happens so quickly." But happened is that thought is just outside of your awareness. And when you stop and when you look and you practice being the observer, which many times you'll have to practice doing after the fact, you'll notice thoughts like, "What an idiot. People shouldn't drive like that."

And you'll also start to notice that there is a feeling of anger, but it happens so quickly that time between the thought, the feeling, and the action, swearing and giving the finger, that it seems like there's no cycle unfolding at all. It seems like you just act.

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But listen, practicing being the observer after the fact, understanding what went down, what was I thinking in the moment, how was I feeling, what led to me swearing and giving somebody the bird, that helps not only you to understand your own think-feel-act cycles, but also to slow down those knee-jerk reactions in the future.

And that is incredibly important when it comes to a habit like overdrinking, which for so many of you feels like it's just an action. Like, I don't even know what happened, I don't even know how I poured that third glass of wine. It just occurred, right? There was no thought, there was no feeling. I was reaching for the bottle before I knew it.

You need to start doing this work of being the observer to slow it down and see the cycle unfold. But what's more, the real benefit, other than the fact that you quickly learn how to change your habits is that when you start practicing being the observer, when you start watching and noticing the thoughts in your mind, you start to understand, "Hey, that's not me."

You start to see like, I am not my thoughts. So how do we know this? How do we know that we are not our thinking? Because here's the thing. I talk about, you know, all the thoughts that you're having every day, that electronic news ticker that's running through your mind, tens of thousands of thoughts. So you can think on the one hand there's all your thoughts, and on the other hand, there's a part of you that can observe your thoughts.

So think about that, guys. There's a part of you, the electronic news ticker with all your thoughts, all your thousands of thoughts, all day long. And then there's another part of you that can observe that ticker, can observe your thinking. And what that means is that there's a part of you that is separate from your thoughts. If you can observe your thinking, there must be a part of you that is separate from your thoughts.

So all of a sudden, when we're like, "I don't want to have any bad thoughts, I know I shouldn't think that way, it's silly, it's stupid. I don't want to have these unkind, irrational, immoral thoughts." Whatever it is because we're so

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concerned that it's a reflection of who we are as a person. But once you start practicing this skill of being the observer, you realize, "Oh, that's separate from me because I can also observe that silly thought. So there's a part of me that isn't that."

This is why it is possible to observe what you're thinking, notice its effect on you, and more importantly, learn how to change it. Learn how to shift your automatic think-feel-act cycles, the ones that are currently outside of your awareness, the ones that are currently driving your habit, and shift them on purpose to something that will benefit you and something that will serve you.

Listen, if you were your thoughts, if there was nothing separate, nothing to observe your thinking, no part of you that could look at a thought and say, "Hey, is this helping me? How do I feel when I think this thought? How do I act when I have this feeling? What results am I getting? If there's no part of you that could do this, then listen, you would be hosed. You wouldn't be able to change your think-feel-act cycles. We'd all be stuck with whatever automatic ones we had.

But because there is a part of you that is separate, a part of you that can look at your own thinking, there is a part of you that can start to change your own cycles, and that is why you can have so much power to change habits that feel unconscious, feel like there's nothing there. You're just acting. But there is a part of you that can start to observe it, that can observe the merry-go-round.

Not only that, but you can start to see where some of your thoughts come from. So many of mine, my thoughts about fear, my thoughts about rejection, my thoughts about anxiety, I now immediately am like, "Oh hey, how you doing lower brain? How is it down there being all primitive? I know you're trying to protect me, I know you're trying to help me and serve me, but like, I'm good." Right? I can see where my thinking is coming from.

And suddenly, the question that everybody has, which is how can I stop all these negative thoughts? If my thoughts create my feelings and my feelings

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drive my actions, then I just want to stop all these negative thoughts. Instead, the question can morph into what part of me is saying this. Is it my lower brain or my higher brain that's telling me I deserve a drink right now? Is it the current version of me or the 10-year old version of me that wants to make sure that no one is ever mad at me and everybody's happy?

Is it my 37-year old self or is it the version of me at 16 years old, that experienced a major trauma that says, "You got to push sadness down. Stuff it down, don't let it out." Is it my prefrontal cortex? The part of my brain that can think and plan and weigh the pros and cons and go after my dreams and my goals? Is it that the part of me that is thinking, "Nobody likes a buzzkill," or is that part of me coming from my lower brain, the part that just absorbed all these messages from my peers, media, entertainment, all these messages about drinking and just never questioned it?

So instead of just believing your thoughts and seeing them all as true, not only can you start to observe them but you can start to ask yourself, "Hey, where is this coming from? Which part of me is saying this?" And that is incredibly powerful.

If you believe that your thoughts are who you are, you will feel helpless. Helpless when confronted with your negative thinking. I did. And here's why. Because I thought that all my negative thoughts about myself were just the truth. It was just the truth that I was weak and undisciplined and lazy and not good enough. It's all just true. I didn't understand that my thoughts weren't me.

I didn't understand this concept of the observer, that there was a part of me that could examine my thinking. I just say all my thoughts, all those ones that just automatically ran through my head, like, oh, that's just true. That's just the truth about who I am as a person. I had no idea that that thinking was optional.

But of course, all of your thoughts are always optional. All of them are. You can always choose to think something different. And the reason why, the

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reason why we know that all of our thoughts about ourselves are optional - now, it's all of our thoughts about the world are optional, but also all of the thinking we have about who we are as a person, that too is optional. It's for a really simple reason. You have thoughts about who you are as a person, and other people have thoughts about who you are as a person, and a lot of times, they don't line up. So who is right?

Let's say my husband thinks I'm a hottie, thinks I'm gorgeous. And I think, I'm okay. Who's right? Am I right because I'm thinking, I'm okay, and it's my thought and my thought is the truth? Or is my husband right that I'm a hottie and I'm gorgeous? Which person? Right? I'm still me. There's only one Rachel Hart.

Actually, that's not true, there are a million of us. But like, there's only one me so which one, which person is right? I want you to consider this. I want you to consider that you and me and everyone, we're all neutral. Just like circumstances in the world, just like facts in the world, we exist and different people, including ourselves, can have different thoughts about us.

Now, I always assumed that my thoughts about me, all my thinking about who I was as a person was automatically correct. It all just must be true because I didn't understand that my thoughts were optional. It just so happened that for a very long time, all of my opinions about myself were terrible. None of them were good, really, and I didn't understand that the reason why this was because I have a brain, you have a brain, all humans have these brains that have been conditioned to see the negative, to spot the danger in our environment, and that includes seeing the negative in ourselves.

It was a survival mechanism that frankly is no longer serving us. So the problem is we don't learn that we are not our thoughts, we don't learn that they're optional, we don't understand, no one shows us how to observe them, how to question them, or that it's even possible to start to change and shift them. And so instead, we start to just run and hide from our negative thinking.

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I talk about it - I actually talk about this in my book, Why Can't I Drink Like Everyone Else, as this idea as, you know, what would happen if somebody followed you around and they were criticizing everything you do? You know, at first, you'd probably be like, that person's kind of annoying, and maybe you'd roll your eyes and you tell yourself like, I'll just ignore them.

But if they kept at it, if they kept following you around all the time, telling you that everything you were doing was wrong, you might at some point get kind of frustrated and start to be like, "Hey, stop. Stop talking to me like this." But what if they didn't? What if they kept at it?

Soon what would happen is that you would really try to figure out how can I escape them. And if that didn't work, if you couldn't escape them, you might eventually try to find something to help muffle the sound of their voice so that their opinions, while still there, didn't sound quite so loud. This is exactly what we do with our own negative thinking about ourselves.

First, we tell ourselves to ignore it, then we yell at ourselves to stop. Then we try to run away from our thinking, and finally when none of that is working, we start to find ways to numb that inner critic. And it can be with anything, but for a lot of us, that go-to method becomes, "Let me just get a drink. Just have a drink and that inner critic will just get a little quieter. I can finally have a little silence, I can finally have a little peace of mind."

And the reason that we feel so bombarded by this negative critic, by our negative thoughts is because we believe that we have no control over it, we believe that it is just a true assessment of who we are as people. No one ever showed us how to use the think-feel-act cycle, and no one certainly ever showed us that we can observe our thoughts, that we are not our thoughts, we can choose to think different things.

So we assume that the way we think about ourselves is fixed. It's just who we are, that our opinions aren't opinions at all, they're not optional, they're just the truth. But this is what building the muscle of being the observer will help you start to see and understand. It will help you start to get off the merry-go-round, get off the commotion of that ride, and start to not only

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observe your thoughts about yourself, observe your thinking about the world, observe your thoughts about drinking and not drinking from a distance, but see that you can start to question it.

You can start to decide, hey, if my thoughts create my feelings, and my feelings drive my actions, then is this thought, "I deserve it," helping me? Is this thought, "Nobody likes a buzzkill helping me?" Is this thought, "I just can't be fun unless I have a drink," is that helping me?

And once you understand that, you can start to see, maybe I want to shift it, maybe I want to question it. The practice of being an observer is not only useful for negative thinking, it is so useful when it comes to dealing with your desire to drink, dealing with your urges. Because for so many of you, the urge to drink, the desire to have a glass of wine or a beer, or a cocktail, it right now feels like something that has to be immediately fulfilled.

I have the desire, so I got to act on the desire. And the process is so fast. It's such a knee-jerk reaction. And what I want you to see is not only that you don't have to have this kind of knee-jerk reaction, but you can also observe it as an urge, observe it as a desire, and see it for what it is. It's a reward that you taught your brain to expect in certain situations.

You can feel that desire, you can feel the wanting. You don't have to push it away, but you also don't have to act on it. I had a client recently say to me, "You know, I just don't want to want it. I don't want to want to drink anymore." And the problem was that thought, "I don't want to want it," was creating all this resistance for her. Because every time an urge came up, it just drove her nuts. Why are you here? Again? I don't want to want you.

And we talked about how we could change that thought from, "I don't want to want it," which created all this resistance when her urges came up, to a thought like, "Of course I want this because that's what my brain is used to. That's what I taught my brain to expect at five o'clock when we go to a restaurant, when I'm at a party. Of course that desire is there, of course that urge is there, but that doesn't mean I have to fulfill it. That doesn't mean I have to act on it."

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Right? You can start to erase the resistance, and that is exactly what she started to do. I will tell you that I have watched this happen in such crazy profound and interesting ways in my own life. Now, I will tell you that at this point in my life, I don't experience the urge or the desire to drink. It really is something that has vanished for me. But I have noticed that on occasion, when I have a really intense negative emotion, I do sometimes get the urge to smoke.

So I've mentioned this on the podcast before. I started smoking in college and smoked all the way into my 30s. A long, long time, long period of teaching my brain to expect the reward that a cigarette gives me. I haven't smoked in years, but sometimes when I have that really intense negative emotion, it will come up.

So you know, I have a theory about why that happens, why it happens with a cigarette and not with a drink. And my theory is this: is that when I was smoking, a cigarette, nine times out of 10, was always the first thing I reached for. It was easier to access in many ways than a drink was. It was easier to have a meeting that went terribly at work and go outside and have a cigarette. I wasn't going outside and having a gin and tonic.

And so it was that kind of first knee-jerk reaction for me, especially when there were negative emotions. So the last time that this happened, this was a couple years ago. I had recently gotten engaged about six months earlier, and my husband had given me this beautiful engagement ring from the 1920s. It was an antique ring. I loved it. I loved everything about it.

And one week about six months after he gave it to me, I was at home by myself, he was out of town, he was travelling for work, and so crazy, but it accidentally fell down a running garbage disposal. I dropped it by mistake down a garbage disposal. That was running at the time.

You can imagine what happened to the ring. It was destroyed. I did not have a good reaction to this. I was basically curled up on the floor in our kitchen beside myself. So upset, in tears by myself. My husband was all the way across the country in New York. I was in San Francisco. There was no

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one there to comfort me, and I could not stop replaying it over and over again. How could you be so stupid? How could you have done something so foolish? How could you have destroyed an antique ring from the 1920s?

But here's the thing. I was all by myself. There was no one there to help me cope with what was going on. He wasn't coming back until the end of the week, and I'm pretty sure this happened on a Monday. And I remember at some point, I was curled up on the couch later on in the night, alone, in so much emotional pain, watching my brain just spin and spin and spin on these stories of how could you have been so stupid, you're such an idiot, I can't believe you did this, it's unforgivable.

And at some point, I watched - still crazy to me - I watched my brain be like, "You should probably go to Walgreens right now and get a pack of Parliaments." And I'm laughing because you know what, even in that moment, I was having this incredibly intense emotional experience, it was so crazy, I was so upset, and in that moment, when my brain was like, "Go to Walgreens, get a pack of Parliaments," my observer just kicked right in.

I wasn't on that merry-go-round, I wasn't on the ride. I wasn't having a knee-jerk reaction and getting up off the couch and walking to the drugstore and buying a pack of smokes. I was like, "Oh, that's weird. Where did that thought come from? What part of my brain is telling me to go to Walgreens and get a cigarette when I haven't smoked in years?"

And in that moment, even while I was experiencing all this negative emotion, even while I had all this negative thinking going on, I was like, "I guess that is like, an old habit cycle at work. I guess it's just like a habit cycle re-emerging because I'm having such an intense emotion." And there I was, distraught on the couch, in tears, feeling all this negative emotion, all this negative thinking, the urge to smoke appeared, that little voice that said, "Go to Walgreens, you'll feel better."

I saw it, I saw the urge, I watched it, I was curious about it, I wondered where it came from, and then it just vanished. It just disappeared. And then

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I just kept on with the rest of my evening. I didn't immediately feel better, but I definitely didn't act on that urge to go have a smoke.

And that is the power of observing. That was able to happen for me because I had practiced observing my thoughts and observing my feelings, and more importantly, observing my desires over and over and over again. That is the power of not being on the merry-go-round, watching it, watching it spin. Watching that carousel go around and around from a distance.

So that's what I want you guys to think about this week. Practice. Can you step off that merry-go-round? Can you just look at your thoughts? Can you just look at your emotions? You don't have to be on the ride. You can start to learn how to watch it from afar, and if you can do that, not only with all of your thoughts and all of your feelings, but if you can do that with your desire to drink, with the thinking you have about what it means not to drink, to be on a break, with the thoughts that you have about what it means to go to a party and have a seltzer, whatever it is, that will start to profoundly change the habit for you.

Alright everybody, I know this was a long one. Hope you stuck with me. If you have any questions, as always, you can send me an email at podcast@rachelhart.com. I love answering your questions. Also, love hearing about what ideas, what topics you want to hear me talk about on this podcast. 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.

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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.