

## Ep #70: Triggers



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Rachel Hart**

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## Ep #70: Triggers

You are listening to the *Take A Break* podcast, episode 70.

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. It is a beautiful, beautiful Friday in San Francisco. There's a lovely, lovely blue sky. It's been raining all week so it's really nice to have a change in weather.

Today, I want to talk to you about the idea of triggers. I hear this word being used all the time. And when I'm working with clients and teaching them about the think-feel-act cycle and how to use it to change their drinking, but not only that, how to use it to change anything in their life, how to use it to feel better, the idea of triggers or being triggered comes up quite a bit.

So I want to do a podcast on it just to really dig into it so that you can understand the pitfalls of this word, why you need to start to conceive of it in a different way and how really letting go of the idea that you are triggered or something is triggering is going to serve you in the process of changing your habit, but also in the process of feeling just overall better.

So, if you've been listening to the podcast, you heard in episode 32 where I talk about the habit cycle. And in that podcast, I talk a lot about this idea of a cue. And because triggers and cues are often confused – right, when I start talking about this idea that we have these signals that tell our body it's time to do something or signals that tell our mind it's time to start a habit, people often replace the word cue with trigger.

So I want to talk a little bit about what I discussed in episode 32 about cues so that we can have that baseline knowledge before we talk about the idea of being triggered. So a cue is just a signal. It's a signal to your body and your body uses it to tell it when to do something. And some cues that your body uses are intrinsic. They are entirely outside of your control, so if you think about the cues your body uses that are connected to your circadian rhythm, one of them is the sun rising.

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That is a cue for your heart rate, your blood pressure, and your body temperature to all rise. So as daylight comes up, our body gets that cue. That is intrinsic. It is outside of your control. But other cues – and these are the ones that I really focus on when helping people learn how to change the habit of drinking – are cues that are learned; signals that we unconsciously taught our mind to use as a moment when the mind learns to expect a reward.

So what does that look like? For example, a lot of people have cues when it comes to drinking with the time of day. So it's 5PM, the day is ending and all of a sudden you notice this desire for a drink. So you're heading home from work and that becomes a cue for your brain to start desiring the reward of alcohol.

Now listen, this is not intrinsic. You weren't born with the desire to have a drink at five. You taught your brain to use time, use the end of the day, as a cue to expect a reward. You got into the habit of coming home and pouring a drink and coming home and pouring a drink and coming home and pouring a drink and soon enough, your brain was like, "Oh, I get it."

Once the workday is over, we get a reward. And so suddenly, it's like that desire just appears. But of course, your mind is using time as a cue. So here's the problem; learned cues, like the cues that all of us unconsciously teach our brain around the habit of drinking, can feel as if they're outside of your control.

That's what people would say to me all the time, like, "I don't know where this desire came from; it just appeared. I don't know why I had this urge; it just came out of the blue." It feels so automatic and that makes a lot of sense because habits are very automatic; they're very fast. It is your brain wanting to do something without using or expending a lot energy to think about it.

But you can learn, not only how to change your habits, but how to use cues in your environment – the time of day, how you're feeling, what you're doing, an event, a sound, a person, a place, whatever it is – you can learn how to use these cues to your advantage. You can see the thoughts and feelings that your brain has learned to connect with them. And we do that by really bringing a lot of awareness to the habit.

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Now, most of you guys are not really that aware of your cues. And that's okay; I wasn't either. And truthfully, sometimes, it may really feel like the urge to drink appears out of nowhere; so I understand if you feel that way. And one of the very first things that I do when I start working with people and helping them to change their drinking is to really have them spend time identifying their cues. What are the things in their environment when they notice they feel desire or when they notice the urge appears?

Because, if you can start to have more awareness of your cues, you can start to have more awareness for how that think—feel-act cycle – which right now, for many of you, isn't totally in your conscious mind – how it's unfolding.

So remember, a cue is anything that gives your brain the signal to start the habit cycle. And in the case of drinking, it's a signal to start desiring a reward. It can be a time of day, an event, an object, a smell, a sound, or even a person.

Now, the one cue that I talk about quite a bit is the idea of your emotions being a cue – how you feel before you notice that desire. Were you feeling awkward and so you reached for a drink? Were you feeling lonely? Were you feeling angry, frustrated, stressed, anxious? Whatever it was, emotions can be a big cue.

So listen, if you haven't listened to that episode in full, I want you to go back now and listen to episode 32 because I really do a deep dive on how the habit cycle works and the role of cues.

Today, what I want to dive into is this idea of a trigger. So I hear the word trigger all the time; much, much more often than I hear the word cue. So I'll hear people say, "My mother-in-law really triggers me." Or, "People who dominate the conversation, they're such a trigger." Or, "Work stress is really a trigger for me to drink. I can't be around these friends anymore because when they're drinking it's a trigger for me."

Now, my guess is that you are also familiar with this. You've either heard people use the word trigger or maybe you use it yourself; you talk about triggers in your environment. I always tell people, when they start understanding the think-feel-act cycle, when you start to understand that your thoughts create your feelings and your feelings drive your actions, that that means you really have to pay attention to the thoughts in your mind.

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And not only that, you have to pay attention to even the words that you are using. So I always say semantics matter. When we're dealing with changing a habit, when we're dealing with the think-feel-act cycle, you've got to pay attention to the words. So I want you to think about the difference between a cue and a trigger.

A cue is something that serves as a signal or a suggestion to your mind or your body. But if it's- a signal or a suggestion, you still have free will. This is especially true of learned cues. But now a trigger is different; a trigger causes something to start or happen. A trigger is outside of your control. I just want you to really pay attention to that difference; the difference between a cue, which is a signal or suggestion, and a trigger, which means to cause something to start to happen.

Now listen, I know that some of you right now are like, "Yeah, but whenever I'm around this person, I always feel annoyed; always. They are triggering me. And the proof is in the pudding because I always the same way when I'm around them." But here's the thing; people do not trigger your emotions. The think-feel-act cycle, now that is what is creating your emotions.

Not only do people not trigger how you feel, they don't cause your emotions; they also are not in charge of the think-feel-act cycles that are running through your mind. That's where you come in; you're in charge of that. Now, you might say, "Okay, well what if somebody calls me a jerk? Then what – I feel negative, I experience this negative emotion because they called me a jerk, so obviously they triggered it. They triggered that emotion."

But here's what I want you to know; someone calling you a jerk is a neutral circumstance. It does not make you feel anything until you think a thought about what they said, until you make it mean something. And thank god, right. Because if in order to feel good we had to make sure that everyone was always nice and kind and compassionate and generous towards us, well, that would not work out so well because we can't control other people.

When someone says to you, "You're a jerk." You can think a whole host of things. You can think, "Yeah, he's right; I am a jerk." Or you can think, "I wonder why he would say that. I wonder what's going on with him." Or, "God, he is wrong. He has got me all wrong." You can take someone else's words and make it mean a whole host of things.

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So what someone says to you, that does not trigger an emotion because that's not how the think-feel-act cycle works. What someone says to you goes as a circumstance. It is a neutral thing that then you have thoughts about. But listen, whichever thought your mind chooses, whether or not your mind thinks, "Yeah, I guess I am a jerk." Or, "God, he is so wrong." I want you to know this; the person who said those words to you did not create those thoughts that you are now thinking and did not force you to think it.

Your mind created the interpretation and you are now choosing to think it. Now listen, I get it. No one teaches us this. No one sits us down and explains the think-feel-act cycle and so for most of us, this feels totally outside of our control. It doesn't feel like there's an interpretation – it doesn't feel like there's a choice, but that doesn't mean that's not what's happening.

Your mind created the thought, the interpretation. You are the one choosing what to think. And that is a really, really important difference. You are still in charge. Your thought is still your interpretation or your meaning that you make of any circumstance, including what people say to you. And your interpretation of what people say to you, the meaning that you make of it, whatever meaning you attach to their words, that can always change, which is the best news ever.

So depending on what you think in a situation, that is what is creating your emotions. People do not trigger emotions. And this really – I cannot state more strongly how wonderful this news is. Because if people trigger your emotions and how you feel when you're around certain people as negative then you only have two solutions. One, avoid being around that person. And let me tell you, when people tell me that they are triggered by someone, invariably it is someone that they then say, "Well I can't avoid being around them. I can't avoid being around my husband or my mother-in-law or my mother or my sister or my boss."

So either avoid being around that person or try to get the person to change their behavior – which I know a lot of you spend a lot of time focused on this. You spend a lot of time and a lot of energy trying to get people to act differently. Now the problem is, you are not in charge of how anyone acts. Someone else's actions are connected to their own think-feel-act cycle and,

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last time I checked, we can't crack open someone's head and tinker with their thoughts so that they'll feel differently and they'll act a different way.

So if people trigger your emotions then these are your two options; avoid being around the person or try to get them to change. And here's the thing; the same is true with a drink. If alcohol creates your desire then you can never change that desire. You're stuck with it. You see a drink, you're going to want it. If you see a drink, you're going to desire it. The only solution is to avoid being around booze, which of course, is not sustainable for many of you. It wasn't sustainable for me.

It wasn't sustainable for me to say, "Oh well, I guess now I will only do socializing in sober environments." So this is really good news. The negative emotion that you feel when you're around your boss or the desire that you feel when you're around a drink are not triggered by your boss or the drink.

It may seem very automatic. It may seem like you always feel this way when you're around your boss or around alcohol. But neither of these things cause how you feel, that is not how the think-feel-act cycle works. What happened is this; your brain has learned to think certain thoughts when it is around these two things.

For example, "Oh god, my boss is so annoying." Or when you're around a drink, "I want that; that looks good." And you have gotten into the habit of thinking these thoughts. Once you realize this, you can send your brain on a mission. You can understand that, "Oh, I don't need to avoid being around this person or alcohol and I don't need to try to get either to change their behavior." We try that with people; we don't really try that with alcohol.

Right, you don't need to do either of those things. What you can do is find the thought that your brain is thinking, creating the emotion and understand that you can change it. You can find that thought and look at it, observe it, notice how you show up, notice how you feel, notice the results that you get when you think it and decide, "Do I want to keep hanging onto this?"

Now, I will tell you that this is easier said than done. It takes practice, but it is so worthwhile because it forces your brain to switch from other people and, "Everything out there in the world is in charge of how I feel," which is how most of us go through life, to stepping onto this much more empowered place, but also a much more responsible place of

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understanding that your thoughts create your feelings and that you can observe and watch and understand and shift those thoughts.

That is where you step into being responsible for how you feel. And now here's the thing; I'd much rather be responsible for how I feel because I'm the one in charge. I can direct my energy towards myself, towards my thinking, towards understanding my mind and how the think-feel-act cycle works and I can actually do the work. When we direct all that energy outward, it does not get the results we want.

So I want you to consider taking the word trigger out of your vocabulary because what it keeps reinforcing to your brain is that something or someone is causing you to have a feeling rather than your brain got into the habit of thinking a thought around something or someone and that thought is creating and causing how you feel.

And just think about this honestly; what if nothing triggered you? How much time and energy would you save because you'd no longer have to avoid people, you'd no longer have to avoid certain circumstances? You'd no longer have to get the world to line up to the way that you think it's supposed to be and everything's supposed to turn out.

Now, I do this work all the time and I've been doing it for years and still sometimes I have to slow down and pause and take a moment and remember that where my focus needs to be is on what I am thinking and not what is happening around me or what someone is doing or saying. And I'll give you an example of this.

A while back, I spent a weekend with some friends from college. And one of the guys that was there was someone who knew me pretty well when I was in my 20s and I was living in New York. Certainly, we went out drinking on a lot of occasions. But it had been almost a decade since we had seen each other and a lot had changed in both of our lives, but especially for me a lot had changed.

I'm no longer drinking, I've started this business, I've written a book, I host a weekly podcast all around the topic of taking a break, all around this issue. So I'm in a pretty different place in my life. But the last time he saw me, I was a girl that was first at the bar; the one that was always ready for another drink, always the one wanting to keep the party going. I was in a very different place in my life.

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And so we were together all weekend and there were a lot of events that weekend with alcohol and every time he saw me, he would make a little comment to me. “Oh, I guess you’re not having anything are you, Rachel.” And then he’d give me a smile and a wink. And it’s funny because, of course, with distance, when I talk about it now, it was so innocuous.

But let me tell you, if there was ever a moment where I wanted to say that someone was triggering me, that was it. I was so irritated. And all my mind wanted to do was blame it all on him. And it’s funny because I talk about how in this evolution of mine, when it comes to the habit of drinking, that people make comments about the fact that I don’t drink.

And it’s so rare nowadays that anything really bothers me. I really am often quite fascinated to see where the other person is coming from. But whatever it was in that moment, I was really bothered. And I watched what my brain wanted to do. I watched every time he made a comment, I would just spin. My brain was spinning and, like, god, he’s such a jerk.

And then in the lead up, I would think like, “Could I just avoid being around him. Maybe I don’t have to talk to him, maybe I don’t have to deal with him?” And then I started complaining to other people that were there, like, “Can you believe this? What’s going on? Why is he acting like this?” It’s so funny to think about now because all the while I was feeling irritated, I was feeling annoyed, my enjoyment was impeded because of all the thoughts that I was thinking.

And it was so easy. It was so easy in that moment to be like, “He’s triggering me. Why is he making a comment every time? He shouldn’t have anything to say about what’s in my drink.” I really had my back up about this. And it is so easy, even when you’ve been doing this work, to fall into the trap of thinking that someone else and someone else’s behavior, someone else’s words are responsible for how you feel.

He is making me angry. He’s ruining my time. He’s in charge of how I feel and I don’t feel good right now so he’s a fault. And that is what happens when we believe that someone or something is a trigger; they are the cause. And if they are the cause then we’re completely disempowered.

But here’s the thing; because I have this work, I had the ability to kind of collect myself and observe what was going on. And remember, “Hey, Rachel, aren’t you talking about the think-feel-act cycle going on? Like,

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what is the think-feel-act cycle that is unfolding here? Remember how you talk about other people aren't the cause of your feelings? So what is going on in your brain?"

I had the ability to rely on this skill, rely on this tool and remember, like, "Oh, he doesn't create how I feel. That's my mind's job. His actions don't create my feelings; it's what I'm thinking about his actions, what I'm thinking about what he's saying, that's what's making me irritated.

And my thought was this; he shouldn't be making this a big deal. That was it. He shouldn't be making this a big deal. And when I thought that thought, I felt irritated and I found myself spinning, I found myself trying to avoid him and I noticed that I was complaining to others. Those were all the actions that I was taking. And you know what my result was? I was making it a big deal.

This is how the think-feel-act cycle is self-reinforcing. I had this belief, this thought, he shouldn't be making this a big deal, which made me feel irritated. When I felt irritated, I was kind of spinning on the whole situation. I was avoiding him. I was complaining to others and as a result, I was making it a big deal; the exact thing that I said I didn't want.

But here's the thing; if I had kept tight to the belief that he was triggering how I felt, it would never have sent me on a path to understand the think-feel-act cycle or to find the thought causing my distress or to notice how my thinking was creating the exact opposite result of what I wanted that weekend, which was to enjoy myself.

And so I made a switch. He kept on being himself and I started to switch to, "Oh right, what he says is a reflection of him and his thoughts about drinking, not me. Of course, he's going to comment about what's in my drink or what's in my glass. That's what he does." And you know what – I felt better.

I was less irritated. I wasn't avoiding situations. I stopped complaining. I wasn't making a big deal of it. I was just accepting the situation and I was able to enjoy myself, which is exactly what I wanted to do, all because I recognized that he wasn't triggering me, I was having thoughts about his behavior.

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But I wouldn't have been able to do any of that work – I wouldn't have been able to change how I was feeling, how I was acting and the results that I was getting unless I took responsibility, unless I really held to the belief that that is not how the think-feel-act cycle works. He doesn't trigger me.

Otherwise, if I had kept believing that then I would just continue to be at the mercy of his behavior and to kind of wait and see if he would change so that I could feel better. And that is such a disempowered stance. And this is why I really want you to start thinking about cues, signals, suggestions, rather than triggers which cause.

Instead of seeing people, alcohol, circumstances, whatever it is, as the cause of how you feel, as a trigger, I want you to start practicing seeing them as cues; cues that signal your brain to think a thought and then go looking for that thought, go hunting for it. That's how you can start to use the think-feel-act cycle to feel better, and not only that, but to change your desire.

Because if alcohol creates your desire, then what are you going to do? You're just always going to avoid it. But if you can see the thought attached to it – if you can see how your thinking about alcohol is what's really creating your desire, you are suddenly in an empowered position.

Most importantly, I want you to remember that you always have free will. You can look at your thoughts, you can observe them, you can question them, you can challenge them and you can change them all in an effort to feel differently. And you can do all of that and nothing outside of you needs to change. And this is the power of this work.

Alright, everybody, if you have questions, you want to reach out to me, you want to hear me talk about something specific on the podcast, you can send me an email at [podcast@rachelhart.com](mailto:podcast@rachelhart.com), otherwise, 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

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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](http://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](http://RachelHart.com/join) and start your transformation today.