

Ep #71: Story Editing



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With Your Host

Rachel Hart

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You are listening to the *Take A Break* podcast, episode 71.

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. We are talking about one of my very favorite techniques today. It is one that I have used multiple times in my life, I love teaching it to clients, and I think it is so incredibly transformative. It is called story editing. And let me tell you, if you learn one tool, this one can make such a tremendous difference.

Now, here's why. For so many of you, myself included, when you drink more than you want, when you have a habit of drinking that is not serving you, what will often happen is that you'll start to make change. You'll start to take action to take steps to feel better. You may decide to take a break so that you can really understand how this habit is working. You may start to decide you want to apply the think-feel-act cycle and understand how your emotions and your thoughts are connected to the action of drinking.

And a lot of people, myself included, get to a place where you start feeling a lot better. You start being so surprised at all the things you can do that you thought before like, "That will never be possible. I'll never have fun at a wedding if I'm not drinking. I'll never be able to go out on dates if I don't have a glass of wine. I'll never be able to feel comfortable," right?

You start getting all this progress, which is great. But then what I see over and over again is people will come to me and they'll say, "Listen, I feel better, but I cannot shake that stupid, stupid thing I did when I was drunk. Or the mistakes that I made when I was drinking. I have all these kind of little niggling things that I just wish I could take back. And I cannot figure out how to move beyond this place."

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And let me tell you, I am right there with you. Or I was, I should say. I was right there with you. And I had such a strong sense of I'm feeling better, I'm understanding how the habit works, I'm feeling empowered, but what about the past? What about all those dumb things that I did when I was drinking? What about all the things I said or I wish I could take back? How do I get beyond that?

And that is where story editing comes in. That is where story editing is such a powerful tool. Now, there are a couple things I want to talk to you about. One is just what's the story? What is the story? You know I love defining words here. A story is this: it is an account of an incident or past event. An account. Now, that's a really important piece. In the definition, right there it suggests that there can be multiple accounts.

But of course, when we are stuck reliving the past over and over again and beating ourselves up and being so filled with regret, we don't see that there are multiple possibilities for accounts. There's just our one account. So keep that in mind. A story is an account of incidents or past events, but it means there can be other possible accounts as well.

Now, I talk about this a lot, the idea of, "where does the past exist?" We are in the present right now, there's the past and there's the future. The moment that exists right now is the present. So what about the past? Where does that exist? And I will tell you, the place where the past exists is either words in a book or thoughts in your mind. Most of us when we're talking about our own past, what we're referring to are all our thoughts in our mind.

What we think creates our past. And so what your past is is just a series of thoughts that you have about what has happened in your life. But not only that, it is also your interpretation of what has happened. And this goes back to the definition of story, right? A story is an account. Multiple accounts are possible. And this is the reason why your account of something that happened and your friend's account of something that happened can look so different.

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It's why there can be multiple accounts of the same set of incidents, the same events. Because each individual person is filtering what they interpret to have happened through the lens of their thoughts and their beliefs. This is really important. Just to understand, just to be aware that there are multiple versions of every incident, every past event.

Your account is not the only one. So many of us spend so much time and so much energy wishing that we could go back and change the past. But yesterday, and a month ago, and a year ago, and 10 years ago, 20 years ago, it's all as done and over with as ancient Rome, right? We cannot go back and change ancient Rome. Done and over with, right? It only exists, words on a page, and thoughts in our mind.

Same thing with your past. Same thing with yesterday. So spending all this time thinking about wanting to go into the past and change it is so fruitless because it cannot be done. But listen, that is where so many of you get stuck. That is where I got stuck for a long time. What we do is we if only ourselves, right? Are you familiar with this? If only I had done this, if only I had said this. If only I hadn't had so much to drink. If only, if only, if only, then I could finally feel good in this present moment.

That's what we do over and over again. We spend all this energy fixated on how going back in time could make us feel better now. But here's the thing. The reason we aren't feeling good right now is not because of what happened in the past because the past is over. It exists as words on a page, or thoughts in your mind.

Whatever you are experiencing right now, whatever pain or suffering or emotional distress you are experiencing right now is created by the thoughts that you are thinking right now about the past. But so many of us, we're not focused there. We're not focused on looking at our interpretation, our story of the past. We're fixated on if only I could go back, if only I could change things, if only I hadn't had so much to drink, as opposed to our interpretation of what happened, our story of what happened.

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I'm going to tell you this, and this was a really hard thing for me to wrap my head around. Suffering right now in this very moment is not helping you. I know that sometimes it's easy to believe that it is, that somehow if we can just suffer enough right now, we can make up for what happened in the past. But it doesn't work like that.

When you feel shame or guilt or embarrassment in the present moment, it affects how you act in the present moment. And guess what you do? You hide. You beat yourself up. You look for an escape. You might even turn to the very thing that you're saying caused all these problems, having a drink. Because you know that that's a way to numb how you feel.

So suffering right now is not helping you. Experiencing negative emotion about the past right now is not helping you. It is working against you because that's how the think-feel-act cycle works. Your current thoughts create your current emotions, which drive your current actions and give you your current results.

All of that is happening in the here and the now. And if you're creating a lot of negative emotion, that is not serving you. It took me a while to wrap my brain around this, but when I finally did, listen, it blew my mind because I had so much regret, so much "if onlys" around having had too much to drink in the past. There was so much that I could point to that I regretted.

And my story about what had happened in my past was causing me so much pain in the present that I didn't even realize was just perpetuating the think-feel-act cycle of feeling shame, feeling guilt, and then looking for ways to hide, looking for ways to numb my emotions, way to tune out, zone out, escape my thinking. None of which was giving me good results in the current moment.

So the question then is if it is your thoughts about your past, your story of your past, your interpretation and there can be multiple ones, how do you change your story that you currently have of your past to one that serves you better? Now, this is where story editing comes in.

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I want you to think about right now, some sort of regret that you feel like you cannot let go of. Something that maybe you play over and over and over in your head. And you if only yourself, and you spend a lot of time and a lot of energy thinking, "If only I could have done this differently, if only I could go back in time, if only I hadn't said that thing or done that thing or had that much to drink," what is it for you? What is that moment that you play over and over?

I really want you as we're working through today's podcast to really keep that - that moment front and center as you're thinking about how you could apply the work of story editing. So think about it. What was that moment? What is that thing that you cannot let go of? What is that thing that you keep doing "if onlys" about?

Now, I want you to ask yourself, how do you feel, what emotions do you experience when you think about this moment? Can be anything. But try to name what emotions you experience. Now, if it's connected to regret, if it's connected to something you wish you could do over, it's creating a negative emotion for you, right? You have negative thoughts about it that are creating shame or guilt or embarrassment or disappointment. Whatever it is.

So ask yourself, how do you feel when you play that past event over and over in your head? And once you have an emotion pinpointed, I want you to really think about, so what do you do? What do you do when you feel ashamed or embarrassed or regretful? What do you do when you feel disappointed? What do you do when you feel these negative emotions? You have to start seeing, you have to start understanding how the think-feel-act cycle is unfolding for you right now in this current moment.

So the question for you to consider is why are you doing this? Why are you reliving this past moment over and over? Why are you creating all this negative emotion? That then generates negative actions and negative results. And I think as I've thought about this for myself, I think one of the reasons why so many of us fall into the trap of doing this is because we believe we can shame ourselves into being a better person.

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We really do. So many of us hold on to this idea that if we just - we just hold ourselves accountable, which we never mean in a nice way. Whenever people say that to me, "I just want to hold myself accountable," they always mean it in a very negative way. I'm going to shame myself into being better. I'm going to guilt myself into being better. I'm going to hate myself into being better.

If I feel badly enough about who I am as a person, then I will finally change. So many people, myself included, will hang on to this. I hung on to this for a very long time. I can't be nice to myself because I want to be a better person. You don't become a better person by being nice to yourself. You got to be really mean.

But shaming keeps you stuck. Hate keeps you stuck. Guilt, embarrassment, regret keeps you stuck. All you have to do is put it in a cycle. All you have to do is write it out. And really understand how what you are thinking, all the hateful thoughts, all the thoughts beating yourself up that create this negative emotion, just look at the actions and the results they create for you. That's not how you become a better person. It's how you hide even more and how you look for relief even more.

Those are the actions, those are the results that you get when you beat yourself up. It does not work to shame yourself into being a better person. Trust me. I tried. It really doesn't.

So here's the thing. There were a lot of different areas, a lot of different past moments that I had regret about when it came to my drinking. But one of the ones that I just could not get over was how I spent my time in college. Now, I've talked about this on the podcast before. I was not always a stellar student. And for this really interesting reason. Because I believed that being a mediocre student was a way to differentiate myself from my older sister, who you guessed it, was a very good student.

So I kind of hold on to this thought for a while, that this was how I could be different from her, and then at some point in my high school career, I remember watching her graduate and thinking, "Oh, if you want to go to a

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good college, you have to get good grades. This plan of mine is not working so well."

And so I turned my grades around, and so I had kind of a weird high school transcript, but I worked really, really hard to improve my grades for the remainder of my time in high school. And I worked incredibly hard to study for the SATs and to just do everything that I could to try to get into my first-choice college. And I did it.

I actually applied early. So it was the only college that I applied to. I got in early admission. And I was so thrilled. I remember being so excited like, oh my god, you did it. You had that weird transcript where people were like, "What was going on for you? Why were you getting these grades? Why were you such a mediocre student and then you went into being what seemed like overnight, into a straight A student?"

So I had done it, I had fought really, really hard to get into the college that I wanted to go to. And I got there and I write about this in my book, *Why Can't I Drink Like Everyone Else*, my very first college party. My very first college party. That was really a moment where I started teaching myself that alcohol was a way to get rid of my awkwardness and get rid of my insecurity. And the way that I could be fun and confident and sexy and carefree and from that moment on, it was just like my brain switched into party mode.

And college became how can I have a good time. I was really not so interested in doing well. I was very, very focused on partying. I was very, very focused on the social aspect of it all. And you can imagine that years later, when I was doing the work to change this habit and doing the work to really understand why I felt like I had such a pull to drink, that one of the things I really struggled with was if only-ing myself around my time in college.

It was really a very, very painful thing for me to think back on. So I was feeling better, I was taking a break, I wasn't waking up with next day regret, I wasn't waking up with that kind of, "Oh, what did you do last night?" But I

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couldn't shake, I couldn't let go of this thought like, "What were you thinking, Rachel? You had such an amazing opportunity in front of you. You were at this amazing school. So much to do and discover and learn, and you were so focused on getting drunk. Like, what a waste."

College was over. It'd been over for more than a decade. But the pain from my thoughts about how I had wasted my time, that was very present for me. That was really real. I was very much experiencing present day negative emotion any time I let my brain go to what I had done and how I had spent my time in college.

And I felt so, so stuck until I found this idea, this technique of story editing. So the story editing technique is actually something that I have adapted from a book called Redirect by Timothy Wilson. Really talks about how we can shift all sorts of stories that we have to change how we feel right now. It's a really great book, I really encourage you to read it.

But I want to spend some time with you just talking about how this story editing technique works, and I want you to consider whatever that moment in time was that I asked you about earlier that you keep playing over in your head, whatever that is, I want you to think about it as I'm reading through these questions.

Of course, if you want to do this exercise, please take the time after the episode is over to really write out your answers because that is going to be where you get all the juice. Getting it out on paper and you know, out of your head and onto paper makes all the difference.

So when you're using the story editing technique, when you're trying to see, is there another account of how I can think about this event, how I can think about my past, you really have to be willing to dig in and be willing to just at least look at things from the perspective of a slightly more neutral observer.

So the first thing is identify an event or a time in your life that feels particularly negative, or that you often wish you could do over. And write about why that is. So for me, that was my time in college. I was so fixated

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on having a do over. I really had this belief if only I had applied myself, if only I had done better, if only I had taken advantage of everything that there was academically that was available to me, I was so sure that my entire life would have been different.

And the reason why I wanted that do over was because I believed, well then I could feel good about myself. I can't feel good about myself if I wasted all this time. So think about what that is for you.

And then the next question really is to ask yourself, how do you feel right now in the present moment when you think of that event or when you think of that time in your life? What thoughts come up for you? Now, this is where we're really trying to pinpoint the thoughts that are in your current think-feel-act cycle.

And mine were pretty simple, right? I blew it. What a waste. I was so stupid. Those were the thoughts that just kept coming up for me. Especially the one, I blew it. I blew it. What a waste. So stupid. Those were thoughts that I was currently thinking that I had a very hard time letting go of.

Now, whatever your thoughts are, write them down and then ask yourself how do you act and how do you feel when you think these thoughts? We're trying to dig into more of the think-feel-act cycle here. So of course, when I was thinking thoughts like I blew it, what a waste, I was so stupid, I had a lot of shame. I felt an intense amount of shame about my time in college and how I had wasted it and how I had been so stupid.

So that was what I needed to understand. These thoughts were creating shame for me so ask yourself, okay, so how do you feel when you think these thoughts, and then what do you do when you feel whatever emotion comes up for you? It might be guilt, it might be embarrassment, it might be disappointment. Whatever it is, how do you act, right?

So for me, of course, I would hide, I would look for relief by having a drink or some other form of relief because there are many different ways that you can numb your emotions. I would beat myself up. And I also wouldn't put

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myself out there. I stayed very small. It was like I kind of shrunk inside of myself. Instead of stepping out and taking risks, I just had so much negative emotion that I just stayed hiding in so many different parts of my life.

Now, ask yourself, how would your life be different if you could have that do over? And I want you to get really specific here. I want you to get really, really specific. So you may laugh when you hear how I thought my life would be different, but I had a very, very specific idea in mind of how my life would have been different.

So I believed that I would have had a better GPA, and that I would have spent my senior year of college studying for the LSATs, and then I would have gone immediately into a great law school, and then I would have come out and I would have become a lawyer.

Listen, it's all kind of funny to me as I say this now, but I was so attached to this idea of like, that's what I would have been doing, right? I mean, I wasn't - when I was doing this work, I was not yet a coach. And I was working in communications and I had this sense that I had left this career, this other career that would have been the right career behind. And I just - I had it all planned out. My GPA would have been higher, I would have been focused my senior year, I would have been studying for the LSATs, like it was nobody's business, I would have gone straight into a great law school, and then I would have gone on to be a lawyer.

It's so funny now because now when I - you know, I reflect back on this and I say this all to you guys, I think, "God, I'm so glad I didn't do that." But of course when I was doing this exercise, I wasn't yet there. I was really committed to the idea of that if I could have a do over, this would be what would be different in my life. I would have been on an entirely different career path, a career path that I thought was better and more prestigious and smarter, whatever it was. But that's where my mind went.

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So where does your mind go? How are you telling yourself that your life would be different if you could have that do over? What specifically would change? And I want you to get really specific.

And then after you've done that, I want you to ask yourself, okay, so if you had that do over, what would you think about yourself now? What would those thoughts be? Write down those thoughts, and also how would you feel? So of course, in my do over world, when I'm on this completely different career path, my thought would be, "Oh, I'm a success." And I would have felt proud.

That's what I, in the moment, when I really was struggling to change my story about, you know, how I had blown it in college and I'd wasted my time and I'd been so stupid because I was so fixated on drinking, I thought, "Okay, if I could have my do over and go down that different career path, then I would be thinking about myself, "You're a success," and I would feel pride."

And I think that's a really important thing for all of you guys to identify. What is it that you would be thinking about yourself and how would you be feeling about yourself if you could have that do over? It's a really, really important piece to see.

Because the next question is this: why aren't those feelings available to you right now? Whatever you want to feel instead of what you're currently feeling, why aren't they available to you right now? Listen, it's always because of a thought. There's always a thought that is getting in the way.

And for me, of course, those thoughts were the ones that I had identified earlier in the exercise. I blew it. What a waste. I'm so stupid. All those thoughts were getting in the way of how I wanted to feel right now. But I told myself, no, it's the past that's getting in the way. It was my choices and my decisions that were getting in the way. So do this. Really ask yourself what is getting in the way. Why aren't those feelings available to you right now?

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And now here's where the exercise really asks a lot of you. If you could view the past from the perspective of a compassionate observer, what do you think that compassionate observer would think that you learned from the situation? Was there a gift or silver lining? Or something that you couldn't have known about at the time or anticipated at the time?

Now, this really requires to step in someone else's shoes, and not only somebody else's shoes, but a compassionate observer's shoes. That was challenging for me, but it is worth doing this. It is worth getting this out on paper. You can write about this for five minutes, what do you think that compassionate observer might see as a silver lining or the gift that you couldn't have known about?

Now, even that language, I was like, I don't know, silver lining, gift, what are you talking about? But when I really challenged myself, when I really, really tried to see everything from the place of a compassionate observer, what I came up with was this: every choice that I was making back then when it came to alcohol was an attempt to help myself.

I really was trying to do the best that I knew how with the tools and the skills that I had. I was trying to help myself. I was trying to help myself feel better. And feel more confident, and cope with emotions that I had no idea how to cope with.

And the silver lining, of course, is that once I understood that, I had a whole different approach and a whole different method to think about the habit of overdrinking, to understand why I felt this pull. And it became a starting point that was so much bigger than did I say yes or did I say no to a drink. It became really understanding how drinking was helping me, how it was serving me. Because it was. It was helping me cope with emotions that I didn't know how to cope with on my own.

But it took me a long time to be able to see that, and I really had to step into that place of being a compassionate observer and looking back at that time in college and thinking about, "Okay, so what did I learn? What was the gift? What was the silver lining?"

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And then finally, if you could choose any story to tell yourself about that past event, which one would you choose? Now, I know right now that it may not feel like a choice. But I promise you this: your thoughts are always optional. And the thoughts that you have in your mind, those make up our stories. So your story of any situation is always optional. You can make it mean whatever you want to.

Most of us find this incredibly difficult and incredibly challenging because we don't have the think-feel-act cycle. So we don't understand that it's not just an interpretation of past events, but the thought that we are thinking not only make us feel negative when we think negative thoughts, when we have negative interpretations about what happened, but they create our actions and our results.

And if you start to understand that, if you can see how the entire cycle unfolds, you can understand why it's not beneficial to hang on to some of these stories. So listen, if you are stuck in a place of if only-ing yourself, if only I had done this or hadn't had this to drink, or hadn't said that, if you find yourself stuck here, I really want to encourage you to try out this story editing technique. It is so powerful.

And it's such a powerful way to see that a story is just one account of incidents or past events. There are multiple accounts available. And once you dig into this, you can start to see how the current story that you have not only doesn't feel good, but it isn't serving you right now.

So please do this exercise. It really is a very powerful one, and it can help to start to shake free and let go of these stories that we're telling ourselves that are actually creating negative results for us right now.

Alright, if you have questions, you want to hear me talk about anything on the podcast, you know how to find me. 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

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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.