

Ep #75: Bridge Thoughts



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With Your Host

Rachel Hart

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You are listening to the *Take A Break* podcast, episode 75.

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. 75 episodes. I love it. And today is a good one. We are talking about how to learn how to challenge and change your thinking. This one is so important, pay attention.

I have talked to you guys over and over again about the think-feel-act cycle, and the idea that how you feel in this world, how you feel in this moment is not a result of what is happening in your life. It is not a result of the circumstances around you. It is a result of your thoughts about what is happening, about your circumstances, about yourself, and that those thoughts are what drive how you feel and the actions that you take.

I know a lot of you have really connected to this idea. I really connected to this idea when I first learned about it because all of a sudden it gave me a framework to finally understand, okay, this is why I feel the way I do, this is why I'm taking the actions that I'm taking. For so long I had no framework, I just couldn't understand.

But as interesting of a framework as it is, we want to make sure that it's not just kind of an interesting intellectual concept to think about but a tool that you can use. And that's what we're going to be talking about today because so many of you write in and you say, "Okay, I love it, I get it, so how do I use it? I'm noticing that my thoughts aren't helpful, so how do I change them?"

Or a lot of you will tell me, "Yeah, but these are the thoughts I've always had. This is how I've always thought. How can I just stop thinking this way?" Or, "But these thoughts feel so true. You want me to just ignore that? You want me to just pretend they're not true?"

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So that is what we're going to dig into today. And listen, I get it. I had so many stories, not just about myself and my world and why I felt the way that I did, but I had so many stories, so many thoughts about drinking. How it was my only reliable way to have fun, how I needed it, how I just really liked it, it was sophisticated, and that not drinking was weird or abnormal, life without a drink would be boring, and frankly, kind of a life less lived.

So guess what happened as all those thoughts remained unchallenged? I kept drinking because I kept believing that these thoughts were true and there was nothing to be done about them. This is how the cycle works. The think-feel-act cycle is self-reinforcing.

And this is one of the keys that a lot of people overlook. If you believe something, you will take action that provides more evidence that the original thought was right. You will prove your thoughts true unless you learn how to question them.

And I think about this and it's kind of crazy. Without knowing how the think-feel-act cycle works, it just seems that what you think is reality. It just appears that well, that's how the world works and how could I possibly change reality. Because what you don't realize is that your thoughts are always creating more evidence.

So I really want to dig into this today, I want you guys to understand this, but more importantly, I want to give you a couple different ways to understand how to start shifting your thoughts. Because it is never a matter of just slapping on positive thinking. In fact, I talk about this all the time. That won't work and it will probably backfire.

So let's take an example. Let's take an example like the thought, "I need a drink when I get home in order to take the edge off of the day." This is something that I know a lot of you fall into this trap of thinking this, how you need to have a drink in order to take the edge off of how you feel.

So when you think that thought, it's going to create a little desire, that's the feeling that is created, desire to have a drink. And when you feel desire,

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guess what action that motivates? It's really simple. You get home, you pour yourself a drink. That is the think-feel-act cycle. But now, here is something really important. Your actions are always creating results for you. So if you have a cycle that's currently unfolding and it may be unfolding in a very unconscious way.

"I need a drink when I get home to take the edge off of today," which creates desire and when you feel that desire, you get home and you pour yourself a drink. The question is what are those results?

There are a couple results that are created from a cycle like this. Number one, you start to teach your brain to expect a reward at a certain time of day, say five o'clock, six o'clock, whenever you get home, and also when you feel a certain emotion. Maybe it's stress or anxiety, irritation, frustration. So that's the first result.

The second result is that you teach your brain that the solution for how to change how you feel, how to take the edge off of stress or anxiety or overwhelm, whatever it is, is to introduce a concentrated reward into your brain. So that's result number two.

There's also a third result that you get from a cycle like this. When you don't give your brain the reward of alcohol, and when you are faced with unanswered desire, what you'll be left with is the feeling of restlessness. That's how most people come to understand that unanswered desire is that restlessness of wanting to get something that you are preventing yourself from having.

And most people want to immediately change this. They don't like that feeling of restlessness. So the third result is that you are actually creating discomfort for yourself.

So I want you to think about how this works, how the cycle is self-reinforcing. The more you tell yourself you need a drink when you get home to take the edge off of how you feel, the more you prove that thought to be true. Because you're teaching your brain to expect a reward. You aren't

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learning an alternative way to cope with your feelings, you're just learning how to cover them up, and when you don't give your brain the reward that it expects, you feel that unanswered desire, you feel that restlessness on top of whatever negative emotion that was already there, on top of the anxiety, or the stress, or the overwhelm.

Without that drink, not only do you have no way to take the edge off of how you feel, but you actually feel kind of worse. So you reinforce that original thought that you need a drink when you get home in order to feel better.

Now, most of you have no idea that this is the cycle at work. We're so unconscious to how the cycle is unfolding because it's become a habit, it's become so routine that for most of you, you'll say to me, "I'm not even sure there's a thought there, Rachel. It feels like I just have desire and that desire comes out of the blue and then I just act on it."

But I promise you, your desire is always created. Your urges are always created by a thought first. That thought may now be so unconscious, so automatic, so routine that it seems difficult to uncover it, but trust me, it is there.

Once you start to do this work, once you start to see the thoughts that are driving the cycle, then you have a place to work from. Then you can start to understand, oh, it's the thought that I'm thinking that I need a drink to take the edge off today, that's what's kicking off the think-feel-act cycle and leaving me with these negative results.

Now, what happens for a lot of people is they're like, "Alright, I found the thought. But now what? What do I do? How do I change it?" I've said it before on the podcast, but most people are willing to change almost anything in their life in order to feel better. So we'll go about trying to change our body and our job and our spouse and where we live and our finances, but when it comes to changing our thoughts, a lot of people, myself included at first, were like, sorry, I'm out. That's just the way I think, nothing to do about it.

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But your thoughts are always optional, always. You can change them. And not only that, in fact, you're the only person who can change your thinking. No one else can do it for you. The only way to disprove of a current thought, a thought like, "I need a drink when I get home to feel better, to take the edge off of how I feel," or any thought for that matter, is to first choose to think something different on purpose, and second, practice taking action from that new thought so you can create new evidence for yourself.

Now, here's where most of you get stuck. You find the thought that is kicking off the cycle, that is feeding the habit of drinking, and it's almost always a negative thought, and you try to swap it out with a positive thought instead.

So you want to go from something like, life would be boring if I wasn't drinking, to life would be amazing without alcohol. You're trying to go from something that's really negative to something that's very positive in one fell swoop. But guess what happens? Your brain doesn't believe it.

And for good reason. Your brain has all this evidence that life is boring without a drink because that's the thought that you've thought for so long that you keep creating evidence for, you keep backing it up with the results that you create. You've been proving it true over and over again and in the face of all the evidence that you've created, it's way too big of a jump to believe that life could be amazing without alcohol.

I say this all the time, but you can't just swap a negative thought for a positive thought because your brain will reject it as false. Listen, if someone told me in my 20s that life could not only be amazing without alcohol but better, I would have rolled my eyes and thought to myself, "Okay cuckoo bird," right? You're in some sort of crazy state of denial trying to fool yourself into believing that not drinking is amazing.

Because I had all this evidence that when I wasn't drinking, I was stuck feeling insecure, awkward, and I was missing out. So the idea that life

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could not only be amazing but better just felt way too out of the realm of possibility.

So the question is what do you do? If your current thoughts are fueling the habit cycle but swapping them out with new thoughts, new positive thoughts are too unbelievable, where do you go from here? And the answer is this: you go to something called bridge thoughts.

You can think of a bridge thought as kind of a baby step, it's you headed in the direction of where you want to go. Bridge thoughts may feel only slightly better, they may just open the door of possibility a little bit so you can consider a new way of thinking, a new way of seeing or interpreting a situation.

But I will tell you that that slight change can make all the difference. I tell my clients, you know, you're just cracking open the door just a tiny bit to a new way of thinking. But the reason that you do this, the reason why you start very slow, you take these baby steps is because you want to stay in the realm of believability for your brain. If your brain can accept that this new thought, this bridge thought could be true, and if you believe it as possibly true, you can take action from that place.

So I want to talk to you today about how to create bridge thoughts. This is a really important thing because most people don't yet have a framework for how to do this. So there are three ways that you can do this, and I'm going to walk you through all three.

The first is you can do something that I call detaching from a thought, and all that is creating distance between you and the thought. So instead of seeing it as reality, instead of seeing it as the truth, you're detaching a little bit and creating just space to see that this might be an optional interpretation of your world.

So that's one way to do it. The second way to do it is to create possibility. So you can take your current thought and you can just create a little possibility that something else might be true. We're not jumping all the way

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to positive thinking. We're just kind of cracking the door open that possibility is possible.

And the final thing you can do to create a bridge thought is you can take your current thinking and you can make it as neutral as possible. You can take all the judgment out of it and see if that feels any better, see if that opens up any space for you. And I'm going to show you how to do all three.

This really is the creative part of the think-feel-act cycle. It's one thing to gain awareness of your thoughts, it is one thing to understand how they make you feel, and to see how those feelings have you act as a result, but it is another thing to start to be creative and come up with, well, what could I be thinking instead? What might be a more helpful thought? What could be a thought that would send me in a direction that would serve me instead of keeping me stuck?

Now, a lot of people when I introduce this concept, the concept that you can start to create bridge thoughts as a way to slowly take these baby steps to change your thinking, people will say, "This is so hard. It's so hard challenging my thoughts. I don't know how to do this. How am I ever going to figure this out?"

But I think it's really important to remind everyone that you already know how to do this. You already know how to challenge thinking. You do it all the time. You're just very used to doing it with other people's thoughts and not your own. It's a skill you already have.

So when your partner comes to you and says, "I think my boss hates me," what do you do? Do you just agree? Or do you try to help him or her see the situation from a different perspective? You're probably challenging their thinking.

Or if your best friend says, "I'm never going to find someone to date." Do you confirm her view? Do you agree? "Yeah, it's probably impossible, you're out of luck. You're probably going to be single for the rest of your life." Or do you suggest that she may not be considering all her options?

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All of us are incredibly, incredibly skilled at challenging thoughts. We've just never known that we could take this skill that we have, that we have so developed and honed with other people and apply it to our own thinking.

And this is such good news. It means you already have this skill of challenging thoughts. You already have the ability to see that thoughts are optional and that there may be different and new interpretations. You just haven't applied this to your own life.

So let's look at how this might work. Let's take a thought like, "I will never be able to lose my desire to drink." This is something I hear from people all the time. "I'm never going to be able to lose my desire to drink. It will always be there."

Now, if we put a thought like this in the think-feel-act cycle, and we say, alright, when I think the thought I will never be able to lose my desire to drink, how do I feel? Most people are going to feel hopeless. It's not going to create a very positive emotion for them.

And when you feel hopeless, what do you do? What's your action? Well, I'll tell you, it's probably inaction. You don't do anything. You think change is impossible. And so the result is you don't lose your desire because the more you believe this thought that you'll never be able to lose your desire to drink, the more evidence you create that it's true because you're feeling hopeless and you're not taking action.

So change isn't possible, you aren't interrupting the habit cycle. So that is something that I see a lot of people think. Now, how do we create a bridge thought? If we know that that thought isn't serving you, we know that it's not helping you to believe the thought, "I will never be able to lose my desire to drink," how to create a bridge thought.

Now, you can't jump to something that's really positive. You can't jump to something like, "I can lose my desire to drink," because it's probably too big of a leap for you because your brain has so much evidence that the opposite is true.

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So you have to start small, you have to start with bridge thoughts. This is where the creativity and the kind of baby steps comes in. So you can use all three ways to brainstorm different bridge thoughts. You can detach, you can create possibility, and you can go really neutral. You don't have to do all three, you don't have to create three different bridge thoughts every time. It's just giving you different options. It's like having different roads to travel down.

Here's the first. If we were to look at the thought, "I will never be able to lose my desire to drink," and we were to detach from it, to create a little distance, to remind our brain that that's just an optional thought that I keep thinking, you could start to practice thinking a thought like, "I can't lose my desire to drink is just a thought that I keep thinking."

Now, you may ask yourself, why would that make such a difference? But what it is doing is reminding your brain that the thought, "I will never be able to lose my desire to drink," is not a fact. It is a thought and all thoughts are optional.

We're so used to seeing all our thoughts as facts that even reminding yourself that this is an optional interpretation of your future can help you feel a little bit hopeless. So that's one way.

You can try to create possibility. So when you have a thought like, "I will never be able to lose my desire to drink," you can create a bridge thought, "I am becoming a person who doesn't desire alcohol."

Listen to that. It gives you a little bit of hope, it gives you a little bit of wiggle room. It shows you that a new way forward is possible. When you're becoming a person who doesn't desire alcohol, it creates space for growth and the possibility of change and evolving into something new. So that's another bridge thought that you can try out.

You can also take a thought, "I will never be able to lose my desire to drink," and try to make it really neutral. Try to take the judgment out of it. So the judgment here of course is never. I'll never be able to do it. So if you

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want to make it neutral, one thing that you can do is just say, "I sometimes don't desire a drink."

And this is really powerful because it reminds your brain that there are in fact situations in which you don't desire alcohol. Maybe you don't desire it when you wake up. Maybe you don't desire it on the way to work in the morning. Maybe you don't desire it when you're feeling sick. There could be a whole host of places in your life where you don't desire alcohol. And if you don't desire alcohol all the time, then maybe your desire isn't fixed.

So those are three different bridge thoughts, and you really have to see this as a creative process. But thinking, can I detach from it? Can I create possibility? Can I make it neutral? It gives you a path forward instead of just trying to turn all your negative thoughts into positive thoughts, which your brain is going to reject for being untrue or feeling false.

I help people do this a lot around the thinking they have about urges. So a lot of people will say, "I can't handle the urge, it's too strong, it's too powerful." And when they think, I can't handle the urge, they feel overwhelmed, they feel disempowered. What do you do when you feel overwhelmed and disempowered? Well, you say yes to a drink because you're telling yourself it's too much for you to bear, it's too hard to say no.

And then guess what happens with that think-feel-act cycle? When you tell yourself you can't handle the urge to drink, when you feel overwhelmed or disempowered, and then as a result say yes to a drink, you prove to yourself, you create evidence that actually, urges are too powerful for you.

So this is a perfect example of a thought that you really need to start to shift and change and interrupt. So if you're going to try to detach from it, you could start practicing a thought like, "I can't handle this urge is just a thought I keep believing." Again, creating a little bit of distance, reminding yourself that it's not necessarily true, you just keep believing it.

You can create possibility with a thought like, "I'm open to the idea that urges have no authority over me." Now listen, you're not jumping to a place

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of saying urges have no authority over me. You're just telling yourself I'm open to the idea. You're creating a little possibility for yourself.

Or you can go really neutral. So you can go from a thought like, "I can't handle this urge," to, "This is what an urge feels like in my body." So you're just looking for the physical sensations rather than really staying stuck in all your judgment about it.

This really works the same way, you're just creating a little wiggle room so that you can take different action. Because thoughts that make you feel hopeless and overwhelmed will never lead to positive outcomes. But if you can shift your thinking ever so slightly to create a little bit of hope, a little bit of possibility, you can start to take action necessary to change the habit.

You don't need to just swap in positive thinking. In fact, that probably is going to backfire because your brain will reject positive thoughts as false. It won't feel believable or true. But you can start to use bridge thoughts to start to shift your thinking in little ways that are still believable and actually can help make a big difference in the habit.

So bridge thoughts are a crazy powerful tool that I want you to try to start using. When you notice the thoughts that are keeping the habit cycle going, whatever they are, can you start to brainstorm and create new and different thoughts to think? Maybe thoughts that detach, maybe thoughts that create possibility, thoughts that are more neutral so that you can start to take different action.

Stop telling yourself that your thinking is fixed. Stop telling yourself that this is just who you are and you can't change your thoughts. Start taking the skill that you use all the time with other people, offering them a new perspective, showing them how to view the situation differently, helping them see things in a different light, and start applying that to yourself.

This is how you change the think-feel-act cycle and start to use it as a tool. I'm telling you, bridge thoughts make all the difference. Get creative, write

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them down. Come up with new things to believe. It will help you change the habit.

Alright everybody, if you have questions, you want to hear me talk about anything at all on this podcast, just send me an email at 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 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.