

Ep #78: The Rolodex of Excuses



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With Your Host

Rachel Hart

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You are listening to the *Take A Break* podcast, episode 78.

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.

Well guys, today is a good one. I love today's topic. The idea that I'm going to talk with you about today is one that I love thinking about and you know what, it applies to so many areas of your life beyond just drinking. And you know, this is why I love this work. Because you will learn the skills of how to manage your mind and manage your thoughts and your emotions and your urges and your desire, you will learn how to do that around changing the habit of drinking but then you get to take all those skills and apply them to all these different parts of your life. It's incredible.

So today is all about the Rolodex of thoughts in your brain that are getting in the way of change. Do you remember Rolodexes? I mean, I do. You probably - my guess, but I may be wrong. I'm guessing you don't probably have a huge Rolodex sitting on your desk, but I bet you can picture it. And before that, can we all just for a second acknowledge what a fantastic invention the Rolodex was?

I know now that we organize all our contacts on our phones and our computers, but before we had an electronic way to do it, we had to physically organize our contacts. And think about address books. Address books are kind of unwieldy, right? You got to not run out of space when you cross it out, and what if you wrote it in pen, maybe you got to use white-out and what about all those business cards, where do you put them?

And along came the Rolodex. And suddenly you had this little rotary card file where you could flick through thousands of contacts and swap out new cards as needed. You know, my dad actually still has one sitting next to his side table, his seat in the living room, and he carefully updates his addresses and phone numbers on new cards this way.

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So keep that image in mind. Keep this image of a little rotary file that allows you to flip through bits of content, thousands and thousands of cards at a moment's notice. Because listen, the Rolodex may be kind of obsolete in our world today, but there is a Rolodex in your mind. And instead of addresses and phone numbers, it is covered, it is filled with all the justifications, all the excuses that you have in your brain to stop change.

It's the Rolodex of permission-giving thoughts. Permission to keep the habit going, to keep things the same, to not change, to answer your desire. Because if you've been listening to this podcast, I hope that you know one thing by now. Your brain will resist change unless you supervise it. Change is not efficient and that brain of yours, it loves to be efficient. So this Rolodex, all the justifications, all the excuses to stop change.

Now here's the thing: one of the very first things that will happen when you decide to change any habit, but also the habit of drinking is that you're going to come face to face with your brain's own personal Rolodex of permission-giving thoughts. All the excuses and justifications that your brain has cultivated and used and tested out to see if you would believe them.

If you do believe these thoughts, these excuses, the result is that your brain gets a reward. It gets the reward from a drink. And so that thought, that excuse, that justification gets kind of filed away in the Rolodex for later use so your brain can trot it out at some undetermined point in the future. And unless you understand what it's happening, your brain will turn to the Rolodex over and over and over again to thwart change. My brain did.

And you can either be prepared for the Rolodex or you can fall victim to it. And I want to show you how to be prepared because I fell victim to it for way too long. Now, remember your lower brain, your primitive brain, it only cares about three things. It cares about finding pleasure, avoiding pain, and doing things as efficiently as possible. And this isn't a bad thing. Those three things are really essential for survival, which is why that part of the brain is always on the lookout for reward.

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But not only is it on the lookout for things in the environment to reward it, it's on the lookout for how can I make these actions as automatic and habitual as possible because it wants to be efficient. It wants to save energy. And the more habitual and automatic the reward, the better. It doesn't care whether these habits create long-term consequences or get in the way of goals. That is not the business of the lower brain. It just cares that in that moment, you are being efficient and you are going after reward.

So when you try to change the habit of drinking or any habit, guess what you have to supervise? Your lower brain. You have to interrupt that automatic habit cycle and the brain doesn't want to be interrupted. The brain's like, "No, I got a good thing going here. It's very unconscious, this pouring a drink, and I get this nice reward. Why would I interrupt this?"

But you have to learn how to do this. and what happens for so many of us is all of a sudden, all those permission-giving thoughts, all those excuses, all those justifications will suddenly come to the surface when we attempt to say no. No, I know that you are desiring something, brain, but I'm not going to give it to you. I know that you want that drink, but I'm choosing to say no.

All those excuses come to the surface. That Rolodex, it's in full swing. And permission-giving thoughts, they're really exactly what they sound like. They're just thoughts that give you permission because you believe that they are true, and this point is really important. Just because your brain automatically puts forward a permission-giving thought does not mean you have to believe it or act on it. This was a big thing for me to learn and understand.

Just because my brain said, I want that, did not mean that I had to go get it. But for a long time, I didn't understand that choice. It felt like, but I want it and that's true, so I should go get it, I should have it. Remember, alcohol just sits there. It can't will you to pick it up. It doesn't care whether or not you drink it. Your brain on the other hand, your brain cares. That lower primitive brain of yours wants the reward. In fact, that's what it's been programmed to seek out.

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So it's going to trot out all these permission-giving thoughts. But remember, you have to believe that the thought is true and act on it. You can watch your brain spin out permission-giving thoughts all day. That isn't a problem. The spinning of the Rolodex, not a problem. The problem is when you believe them and you act on them, most often in a very unconscious manner.

So here's a sampling of what that Rolodex might sound like. I want it, I need it, I need a break, I need to take the edge off, I just want to relax, I hate feeling so uncomfortable, I can't take it anymore, I've had it up to here, I've had a hard day, it's been a stressful day, it's been a long week, I deserve it, I've been so good, just this once, one glass won't hurt, it's only five ounces, it's healthy, it's Friday, it's a party, it's free, I want to join in, everyone else is, everyone else will notice, it doesn't matter, who cares, screw it, I'll start tomorrow.

Have you heard this before? I think I've heard all of these, all of these popped up for me in my brain. And trust me, there are many more. Your brain is just going to keep spinning the Rolodex and trying out excuses and justifications until it lands on one that you think sounds good, you believe it, and then you make the decision to drink as a result unless you intervene.

Now, here's the important part, and I don't want you to miss out on this because it really matters. Every time you listen to one of these thoughts, every time you believe them, every time you pick up a drink because of them, your brain gets a reward with dopamine, this neurotransmitter that creates the feeling of pleasure.

Every time you do that, your brain is rewarded and you did this over and over again. So now your brain likes thinking whatever thought it was that led you to go get the drink because it expects that in the future, that thought will also lead to a reward. And not only does it like that thought, that thought's going to feel really believable because you have believed it in the past. And believing that thought in the past led to a highly concentrated reward for your brain.

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So the Rolodex of permission-giving thoughts just keeps the habit cycle going. But listen, all these excuses, all these justifications, they aren't true. They aren't some inner wisdom bubbling up. They're just excuses that your brain likes to use to keep you from change and to keep the habit intact, which means you need to learn how to call them out for what they are and teach your brain that these are not thoughts that get a reward.

Because your brain is always going to come up with excuses and justifications because you're smart. The question is what do you want to do? How do you want to respond in the face of the Rolodex? And I will tell you this: my brain now knows that those types of thoughts and excuses don't get rewarded. It has unlearned that piece of the equation. The thoughts I deserve it, screw it, who cares, which used to always get a reward, a very highly concentrated reward from a drink, now it doesn't anymore. It has unlearned that association. But I will tell you that the Rolodex of course still appears in other parts of my life. Because any time you have a habit, your brain is going to turn to these excuses and justifications.

So I have a technique that I kind of stole and modified from my time of working in human rights. So human rights groups are often - you can kind of think of them as the David versus Goliath. They are the small, usually don't have a lot of resources, tiny budgets, their manpower, the number of people they have working for them, it can't compare with the Goliath of the governments and the corporations that they're trying to go up against, they're trying to battle.

And so a lot of human rights groups use a technique called name and shame and essentially, it's just trying to leverage the power of public awareness to end abuses. So a non-profit might recognize, alright, I'm not big enough, I don't have enough resources, enough money, enough manpower to go head to head with the government, but I can use the tactic of naming and shaming to try to get public awareness on my side and really utilize the public to help push for change.

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So human rights groups will monitor and investigate and then expose these kinds of abuses. So they're deploying the tactic of naming and shaming to try and bring about change because they don't have the manpower to go up against a regime or a huge corporation. And this is what I did in my previous job. I worked in communications so I was really focused on getting our finding in our investigations out for public consumption so that it wasn't just a small human rights group that knew what was happening, it was the broader public and then hopefully the broader public would push for change as well.

Now, here's the thing. It's called naming and shaming. And if you have listened to me, if you have listened to this podcast, you know when it comes to personal development, I am not such a big fan of shaming oneself, I do not think that that is a recipe for things to go right, especially because when we see how shame unfolds in the think-feel-act cycle, it generally leads to hiding. It generally leads to beating yourself up and not taking action. It doesn't lead to the kinds of actions that actually help create sustainable change.

When you shame yourself, when you tell yourself there's something wrong with you, you end up not only hiding but often times looking for relief. You know, I would think this, "Well, if I'm such a screw up, I might as well drink to feel better." That was a pretty good excuse that my brain had on the Rolodex. It's a perfect example of a permission-giving thought that is being fueled in part by shame.

So instead of naming and shaming, which we will leave to human rights defenders, I have my clients name and tame. So the first part, naming is what creates distance. You can start to see the thought, the excuse, the justification for what it really is rather than automatically seeing it as true and believing it. You can see it as just your brain's attempt to spin through the Rolodex and find a thought that you will believe to stop you from changing the habit cycle.

And the second part, taming helps put you back in the driver's seat. You respond back to the thought with authority. You remind yourself that you

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can supervise your brain. You have a prefrontal cortex. You can question and examine and challenge your thoughts and think about the future and weigh the pros and cons. You are not run by your lower brain. So then what does name and tame look like in action?

Let's take the thought, "Screw it." This was a favorite thought of mine. Screw it. Believe that thought over and over again and then took action, gave my brain a reward from a drink. So if you were to apply name and tame to, "Screw it," one of the things you would do is just recognize, oh, screw it is just a thought that keeps the habit cycle going. That's the naming part. You're naming the thought for what it is.

And I can choose not to say screw it to my life because that's really what I was saying screw it to, was my life. That's the taming part where you're making the thought something easier to control. In this case, by reminding your brain who's in charge. So instead of just believing a thought like screw it when you notice it appearing in your head, you can respond back, you can think back to it, "You know, screw it is just a thought that keeps the habit cycle going and I can choose not to say screw it to my life."

Or take a thought like, "Well, everybody else is." This is another one that my brain loved. How do we name and tame that? We can do that by coming up with a response like, everyone else is a thought that my brain thinks to get a reward. I can teach my brain something different. So notice, you're naming this as a thought instead of just believing it as the truth, well everybody else is, you're noticing, hey, this is just a thought, and my thoughts are optional.

My brain is just thinking it because it wants a reward so you're naming how the thought works in the habit cycle and then you're taming it by reminding your brain, yeah, I can practice something new. I don't have to do what I've always done before. I can teach my brain something different in this moment.

Another thought, "Just this once." How many times have you said that? "Oh, just this once, I'll make one exception. Just this one time." So here's

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what it looks like to name and tame it. Just this once is a thought I've rewarded over and over again with dopamine. But I don't have to believe this thought anymore.

So again, the first half, we're acknowledging it's a thought, it's not the truth, and not only is it a thought, it is a thought that I have rewarded over and over again in my brain and we tame it by reasserting your authority. I don't have to believe that thought anymore. I can shelve it, I can put it aside, I can teach my brain something new.

So with the skill of naming and taming, you're creating distance, so instead of just automatically believing a thought, you're recognizing that thought for what it is. Oh, it's just part of the habit cycle, oh, this is just a thought that has been rewarded over and over again in my brain. Oh, this is just a thought to keep me from changing. Because remember, your thoughts are optional. You don't have to think them. You don't have to believe them.

And in the second part, you put yourself back in the driver's seat. How do you want to respond? How do you want to tame it? How do you want to remind your brain that you have ultimate authority? You don't need to be run by your automatic thinking or your automatic habits.

Listen, the Rolodex of permission-giving thoughts and excuses and justifications, every brain has it. The Rolodex is not the problem. The only problem is when we let the brain flip through excuse after excuse after excuse trying to find one that it will believe and don't question, don't challenge what is happening.

So when it comes to these permission-giving thoughts, these excuses and justifications, you can always remind yourself it's just a thought my brain likes to think because it's been rewarded with dopamine in the past. It's just part of the habit cycle, it's just a sign for me to pay attention that my brain doesn't want to change. And you can also remind yourself, it's not in charge of me. I don't have to believe it. It's possible that it's not true. I don't have to act on it. I don't have to blindly obey it.

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But I really want you to see that you have to start identifying these thoughts, you have to be aware when the Rolodex is spinning. You have to challenge the excuses, challenge the justifications and come up with alternatives, and that is what name and tame helps you do. And you would be surprised not only how effective this is but how powerful it is for anything in your life where you feel stuck.

When you start listening to your brain, "Oh, just take a break, you don't have to finish that assignment, you don't have to finish that job. Oh, just get something to eat. Oh, I'm just going to check Facebook for a second," you will see that Rolodex spinning all the time. But the more you start to build awareness around it, the more you will see it in action and the more you can respond to it in the moment. And with practice, you will discover that you don't have to blindly follow that Rolodex whenever it starts spinning. You just have to stop, see what's unfolding and respond differently. And this is such a powerful tool to help you change your drinking.

Alright, if you have any questions, if you want to reach out to me, if you want to hear me talk about anything on the podcast, just shoot 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

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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.