

Ep #81: Impulse Control



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With Your Host

Rachel Hart

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You are listening to the *Take A Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, episode 81.

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.

Welcome back, everybody. So listen, I recently had two very, very similar questions from clients, although they don't seem on the face of it similar, but I want to talk with you guys about today because it has to do with impulse control. And impulse control is something that yeah, if you want to change your drinking, you got to master it. But you know what? It's essential for really anything that you want to do. It really is one of these bigger meta-skills that you can apply to so many areas of your life.

So the first question that a client asked me about, she said, "You know, every time I start a new task, I find myself getting diverted to something else, and it takes ages to get things done. Or once I start, I find myself procrastinating online or looking out the window. Why is it so hard to focus on one thing at a time?"

Now, the second client I was working with had actually a very similar problem, although she stated it in a different way. She said, "I just have no impulse control. If I want something, I almost immediately act on it, whether it's another glass of wine or something to eat, or buying something on Amazon, or even checking my phone. What's wrong with me?"

So these two questions, they sound different, but really, they are talking about the same problem just from a slightly different perspective. So that first question is focusing on how do I get more focus. That's the point of it. And the second question is how do I stop acting on my impulses. But of course, you really have to understand these two things together because behind both of these problems is the same root cause, and that is immediately acting on an urge. And I'm talking about any type of urge.

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This is why learning the skill of how to allow an urge that you have to go unanswered, how to allow it to be there and not act on it, if you learn this skill with regards to your drinking, it can be so transformative if you learn how to do it the right way, if you understand what is actually driving the urge. Because once you understand that, you can apply this skill to almost anything. And I'll tell you, that's what I've been able to do in my life. I learned this skill first with the urge to drink, but now I apply the skill of not immediately acting on impulses, having focus despite all the excuses, all the justifications my brain is making, I apply it to all these different places in my life.

So I want to tell you about a story that happened to me, and I'll tell you, it may first seem like it's really not related to changing your drinking, but trust me, it is. So last fall I was working on a video project. I had this project on my to-do list for weeks, but I was procrastinating. Over and over again I would set aside time to get it done and I wouldn't work on it.

And what was happening is that I had a lot of negative thinking around the project. "This is going to take forever, I don't know how to do this, I'm not sure where to begin," a lot of negative thoughts that were creating negative emotions, and then as a result, what was I doing? I was procrastinating. So I was really letting, in that moment, anxiety and overwhelm take over instead of just sitting down and focusing.

But the deadline was drawing closer and I decided okay, listen Rachel, no more ifs ands or buts, I am finishing this project on Sunday. So I made that commitment and I mapped it out the night before. And when I'm saying I mapped it out, I mean I wrote down my schedule to a T. When I would start, how long I was going to give myself to draft each video and record each video.

Now listen, I know that that is different from how a lot of you work. You don't sit down and decide ahead of time how long it's going to take, you just sit down and see how long the project takes. But guess what happens when you do that? It takes a really long time. You have to really get in the

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habit, get in the practice of deciding ahead of time how long something will take.

So that's what I was doing. I decided ahead of time, the night before I mapped it all out. It was a series of videos. So I had blocks of time. I'm going to draft video one from six to six thirty and video two from six thirty to seven, and I had all my times for recording and what not.

So here's the other thing that was happening that weekend. There was also this pretty big political controversy that was brewing in the news. This was right in the middle of a lot of attention around the protests that were happening in the NFL, around the national anthem and kneeling during the anthem.

Now listen, I am not a football fan. Baseball, yes. Basketball, especially college basketball, yes. I used to run the March Madness pool at my old job. And you know what, I can even watch golf, and my father's completely to blame for this because when I was a kid, golf was always on TV on the weekends and I find it oddly soothing to watch it and have it on in the background.

But football, football I'm kind of meh about. And no offense to any of you football fans out there, but my dad is not a big fan, and so a love of the sport just did not trickle down to me. So yeah, there was this big political controversy brewing, it had to do with the NFL, a sport that I don't really care that much about. It had just so happened that that Friday, the president had suggested that players who kneeled during the anthem should be fired.

And you know, of course this kicked up a big political firestorm on both sides, and everybody was waiting to see how the players would react on their first game back that Sunday. Now, the first game back that Sunday was the Ravens against the Jaguars, and not only that. It happened to be an exhibition game in London and so the kickoff was at 6:30am on the West coast.

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Now, why do I remember so much about this game? I don't even like football. Because Sunday was also the day that I had planned to hammer out these videos. Videos that I had all of these thoughts that were creating dread and overwhelm and anxiety. And what happened was that in that moment, when I sat down to work on Sunday, I really got to see how my brain reacted.

So I am an early riser and when I work on projects like this, I really like to get started first thing in the morning. So on my schedule that day, I had drafted the night before that I would start outlining my very first video at 6am, 30 minutes before kickoff.

Now, I had tried to draft these videos before but every time my brain would get distracted, I'd start working on something else, but I had committed, I really made a solid commitment. Listen, no matter what Rachel, you are getting this project done. Come hell or high water. And that morning, I sat down at six, I started to get to work, but as the time drew closer to kickoff, I watched my brain try to divert my attention. And I will tell you, it was so fascinating to be the own observer of my mind in this moment.

Because my brain was coming up with anything and everything you can imagine. You have to see what's going to happen, what are the players going to do? Will there be a protest? This is history in the making, you can just watch the opening sequence, or maybe just go on Twitter and see what people are tweeting. Or maybe just open up The New York Times, they're probably reporting live. Just keep your web browser open.

My brain was so insistent that I should watch this now. Keep in mind that I don't even like football. And yes, you can argue that this was more than just a football game, there was a potential for a league wide protest, which in the NFL had never happened before. But here's the thing that I knew was actually going on because I have practiced and studied and observed my brain was that I had all these doubts and fears and anxieties about making these videos, which is why I had procrastinated for so long. That's how the think-feel-act cycle works.

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I was having negative thoughts about the videos that were creating negative emotions, and then the result, the action was to procrastinate. And so here was my brain trying to find another way to divert my attention so that I wouldn't have to deal with that negative emotion.

So it was trying to get me not to focus and to just act on an impulse, the impulse to check Twitter, the impulse to open up The New York Times, the impulse to go into the living room and just turn on the game really quickly. I listened to my brain in that moment, I listened to all the excuses, I listened to all the justifications, and let me tell you, some of them sounded really believable.

But I said no. I said nope, you're not going to be distracted, you are not deviating from this plan, you are staying on your schedule, period. The news will be there later, the replays will be there later, you can catch up on all the drama later. Right now, you made a commitment to get this project done, and you are going to practice honoring this commitment and not just respond to your impulses.

And here's the truth: I could have just tuned in right at kickoff, watched for 15 minutes and then gone back to work. And it sounds so totally reasonable. But you have to really ask yourself what would you teach your brain in this moment? You would teach your brain that your focus can be easily diverted, and that impulses are to be obeyed.

So here's what happened that Sunday: I sat down, I got to work, all of my thoughts came up, all of the thoughts I had to divert my attention, to get me to stop focusing, to act on an impulse so I wouldn't have to feel the negative emotions that I was having around doing this video project, and I said you know what, I'm going to keep working anyway. And I completed the entire project, the one that I had spent weeks starting and stopping and starting and stopping and dreading, I completed the entire thing in six hours. I just hammered it out, which felt so good.

But you know what felt better? I was so proud of myself. I was so proud of myself for sticking with my plan, for not deviating, even in the face of all the

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excuses, all the justifications that my brain was coming up with, many of which sounded totally reasonable. And you know what? It was really amazing to see what my brain could accomplish when I stopped listening to the chatter and just got to work. No justifications, no excuses. I held firm.

And the reason that I was able to do this was because I have been practicing the work of dealing with my urges, dealing with my impulses and not deviating from a commitment that I make to myself for years now. And you know what? That work started with the work that I did around changing the habit of drinking. But now I use the skill, the skill I developed of allowing an urge to go answered, I use this skill with everything. Setting a plan, practicing following it, and deciding that I won't deviate course no matter what comes up.

Because listen, something always will. This is how I changed my drinking, and this is how you can change yours. It really is a matter of understanding that your brain's going to have a lot of chatter. Your brain's going to have a lot of excuses. You will have impulses to do something else. Your focus will get diverted. But that doesn't mean that you have to be redirected in the way that your brain wants.

Focus is not a given. I think this is really important. Focus is not a given. It is earned. You earn focus every time your brain says, "Let's just have that drink, let's eat that chocolate, let's check the phone, let's click purchase on Amazon," right? Every time you do that without a plan in place, just an impulse and you say no, that's how you earn focus. Instead of listening to excuses and justifications, which trust me, your brain will always come up with, your brain is incredibly smart, you just stick to your original plan.

And impulse control is something that is a muscle that you build and grow. Every time your brain says, "Hey look over there, let's do this, let's make this exception, I want this, I need this," you stay instead on the path that you had originally planned.

So if you decide that you're not going to drink at a party, you practice not drinking at the party no matter what comes up, no matter what people say,

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no matter all the excuses your brain makes, no matter all the desires and the urges that you have. You practice showing your brain who's in charge.

But the exact same thing is true if you set aside two hours to complete a project. You practice getting it done in the time you have allotted. You don't let it drag on, you don't check your phone, you don't get sidetracked with something else because your brain will want to do that.

Now, most people do not do this. Especially in a world when we have so many distractions, distractions in our pocket, right? Distractions in front of us all the time with computers and TV and messaging, and you know, we are inundated in a world just filled with distractions. But my question for you is this: how often do you let your impulses run your day? And I don't just mean with the impulse or the urge to drink. I just mean your impulses at large.

Now often do you stop and check your phone as soon as it buzzes? Or open your email whenever you wonder, "Huh, I wonder if there's anything new in my inbox." How often do you start working on a project and get sidetracked by something else?

Listen, all of this matters. Your ability to focus, your ability to allow any desire, any urge to go unanswered, not just the desire to drink, that skill teaches your brain that yes, you can want to do something but wanting does not necessitate acting. This is really important. I'm going to say it again. Wanting something does not mean you have to act on it.

And so I want you guys to think today about okay, what is my biggest distraction? Is it email? Is it texting? Is it social media? Is it online shopping? Is it browsing through websites? What is that distraction that you act on with impulse all the time? What is that distraction that deviates your focus?

And I want you to try this. I want you, once you have figured out what that distraction is, I want you to commit to a plan for tomorrow. When precisely, and I mean precisely, will you engage in this activity? When will you check

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your inbox? When will you text? When will you go on social media? When will you do online shopping? When will you browse your favorite websites? Write it down. Make it specific. And do not say two times a day. That's what everybody wants to do. I'll just check it twice. No, no, no, I'm talking about be precise. Exactly when will you engage in these activities?

Now listen, your brain is going to fight this step. Your brain's going to say, "That's not realistic, can't just decide when I'm going to check my text messages, I can't just decide when I'm going to check my inbox." Yeah, you can. Because here's what I always tell people when they say, "I could never do this, people need to get in touch with me, I need to be in touch with people," listen, if there is an emergency, someone will call you. Honestly, if someone really, really needs to reach you, they will call.

So write down precisely what you are committing to for tomorrow and then practice following the plan with the expectation that your brain is going to freak out. Your brain is going to resist, your brain is going to come up with a lot of excuses, a lot of reasons why this won't work in the moment, and welcome that resistance because guess what, the beauty of this is you get to see what your brain will do, the lengths that it will go to to try to get you to act on your impulses.

That resistance to following a plan isn't a problem. The excuses aren't a problem. The impulse themselves are not problems. The only problem is when you obey all of it blindly. So when that happens, I want you to write down all the justifications, all the excuses, whatever your brain comes up with so you can really clearly see the lengths that your brain will go to try to get you to just act on an impulse.

And then finally, practice not acting on them. That is really key. Now, listen, this might seem totally irrelevant to changing your drinking, but I promise it's not. Because what happens in the moment is the same thing. Your brain feels the desire to drink, the desire for more, and guess what happens? You act on that impulse without thinking.

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You have no immediate focus, you don't have immediate impulse control, you just let the habit take over. And you allow the brain to blindly go after what it wants. You can train your brain in small ways that make a huge difference when it comes to your drinking, and frankly, in lots of different parts of your life.

But you have to do the work to teach your brain that just because you have an impulse, just because you have an urge or a desire is not a reason to act on it. Yes, it will feel a little uncomfortable in the moment, that's the point. It feels a little uncomfortable to wonder what's in your inbox and not check. It feels a little uncomfortable in the moment to get a text message and not immediately open it because your brain's having all these thoughts like, "What's in there? I need to know. Could be important."

But the point is for you to teach your brain who is in charge. Is the lower brain running the show? Is it all about whenever you have an impulse you just act on an impulse and focus be damned? Or is your higher brain, your prefrontal cortex, the part that understands your dreams and your goals and can plan and weigh the pros and cons, is that the part that you want in control?

Because here's the thing: that Sunday, the NFL did see the biggest league wide protest in its history. And no matter where you stand on the issue of the national anthem protest, it was a historic day. But for me, that night I watched the replays, I read the commentary, I caught up on what happened, and I could not have been happier or prouder to have had the experience of watching my brain try everything it could come up with to divert my attention and know ultimately that I was the one in control.

And that is a skill that I only learned to do because of what I learned to practice around not answering the desire to drink, allowing it to go unanswered. Wanting does not mean you have to act on something. So think about this.

Let me know if you have any questions. As always, if you have ideas for the podcast or questions that you'd like to hear answered, you can send

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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.

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