

Ep #103: Drinking and Emotional Tunnel Vision



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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 103.

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. So listen, yesterday was a bit of a milestone for me because I wrote my final entry in my very first five-year diary. So if you're not familiar with the concept of a five-year diary, let me explain. It's basically a diary where you are writing short entries for every day over five years. And the really great part about it is how it's structured.

So each page is devoted to one day of the year and that page is then subdivided into five sections. So it looks like this. If you turn to the page for January 1st, you'll have five spaces for five entries. And in the diary that I just completed, I have entries for what happened every day in 2014, 2015, 2016, 2017 and 2018. That was the last entry that I did for December 31st 2018.

And why I think it's so great is because as time goes by, once you have a full year of entries, you're able to read about what was happening in your life each time you turn to a new page and write down basically kind of the cliff notes of what happened. Now, this was the first time I'd ever kept a diary like this but really was the first time I'd ever been this consistent with a diary.

Because in the past, I would start diaries or journals and I would write for a couple days or a couple weeks, maybe even a couple months, and then I would forget about it and then what would my brain do? Oh well, you haven't written for a week or you haven't written for two weeks so I've just kind of put it aside.

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But because this five-year diary, the entries are so small, it was really manageable to just jot down a couple things that happened each day. Now, I started the diary in 2014 because the year earlier I actually found two five-year diaries that my great grandmother Mabel and her sister-in-law Georgie kept in the 1930s, and if you listen to this podcast, you know that I'm a lover of history and it really blew my mind when I found these diaries.

I loved reading through them. I never met either of these women and it was so fascinating for me to have this little window into what their lives were like living and working on a farm in rural Connecticut. So I got a diary for Christmas in 2013 and when the new year happened, I just thought, well this will be fun. I will try this out and see what happens.

But I'm going to tell you two really amazing things happened. The first, and I could not have known this, but when I started keeping the diary in 2014, I was single, I was living on my own in Brooklyn, I was working at a human rights organization and actually, I had worked myself really up the ladder. I had a great job, a great title, a really good salary, but I was pretty unsatisfied.

I knew kind of deep down that this isn't what I wanted to do. So if you have listened to the podcast at all, when you hear me describe that time in my life, you know that things are totally different for me. I'm now married, I live in San Francisco, I quit that job that frankly, was so good on paper and a lot of people told me I was incredibly lucky to have, but just didn't feel like the thing that brought me to life, the thing that I really felt like I was meant to do in this world. I started a coaching business, and this year I had a baby.

So it has been a crazy period of time, a crazy period of my life to capture what was happening every day over the last five years. So that's one thing that's been really amazing. But the other amazing thing is this; once I had that first year of entries, as I would go back and read through what had happened a year earlier when I was filling out a new entry, I started to realize something incredibly profound.

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I started to notice that the good moments that I wrote about were way better than I realized at the time, and the bad moments that I wrote about, for the most part, were actually pretty insignificant. Yet, in the actual moment when I was in the emotion, I was not giving enough significance to what was happening where I felt a positive emotion and way too much significance to when I was feeling a negative emotion.

So what happened was that this diary and keeping track of my life and writing these entries really helped me realize that there are all these tiny amazing moments that feel kind of subtle, and frankly, a lot of them, most of them probably would have been otherwise forgotten in time. So just maybe a spontaneous dinner with a friend or going on a hike or going to a museum or sharing just a silly moment with someone, all of that would be so easily forgotten unless you make note of what is happening, unless you make note of that moment.

And going back and reviewing it really reinforced to me how often I was kind of blowing past all these positive moments in my life. There was so much, especially that last year in New York when I didn't know it was going to be my last year living in New York City, that you know, I was enjoying myself but I wasn't necessarily savoring because I just assumed that my life was always going to be my life, that I wasn't going to leave New York and I was always going to have my friends all around me. And here I am now thousands of miles away.

But the other thing that I realized is that the bad days, the entries where I write about how I'm a little down or annoyed or frustrated, or I feel like I'm in a funk, when I read them now, so often I can't even remember what it was about. And even if - here's the crazy thing. Even if I have written down why I believe I feel this way, whatever I thought was the cause of my negative emotion, with distance, it feels so hard to connect to what I was so upset about, what I was so annoyed or frustrated with.

Now listen, don't get me wrong. There are some things that happened over those five years where I was filling out this journal that I can immediately connect with a negative emotion. For instance, my grandfather, whom I

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was very, very close with passed away and I definitely can connect with that and I can definitely connect with the grief and the negative emotion that I have around his passing.

But for the most part, when I write about day days in this diary, the slights, the annoyances, the frustrations, it really is very hard to remember or connect with what in the moment felt like an incredibly big deal. And this is what I want to talk to you guys about today. I want to talk with you about the tunnel vision that all of us get when it comes to how we are feeling unless we start learning the skills of how to coach ourselves.

It is a loss of perspective that frankly, creates so much pain. And here's the thing. It's something that really most people struggle with but the habit of drinking, the search for immediate gratification, the search to immediately try to cover up how you are feeling by pouring a drink, it will make it so much worse.

When you have tunnel vision, you lose sight of the big picture. You can't see anything that's in your periphery. You just see what's immediately in front of you. And the problem with that is when that happens with how you are feeling, it really will work against you.

So let's say you're feeling a negative emotion. When you have this kind of emotional tunnel vision, it is incredibly easy to convince yourself that you're never going to come through the other side, that you are going to be stuck feeling sad or angry or lonely or bored forever. I think about all the times I have told that very thing to myself. How many times I have tried to convince myself that I would never see that negative emotion through to its end.

Now, I want you to think about this. I want you to think about how we're very familiar with the idea that stories have a very clear beginning, a clear middle, and a clear end. But emotions have the exact same framework. They have a beginning, a middle, and an end. And most people don't get to experience those three stages or three parts of an emotion.

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So an emotion begins with our thinking. So that's the think-feel-act framework. Our thoughts create our emotions and our emotions, how we're feeling, drives what we do in life, how we're acting. So that's where an emotion begins, that's the start of it.

When you're in the middle of an emotion, you're feeling it. So the way that you know that you are experiencing an emotion is that you feel it in your body. Your body is what lets you know that you are experiencing an emotion. We have all these physiological changes that coincide with different emotions. So your heart rate may speed up or slow down, your breathing may change, muscles can tense or relax, how we hold our body will be different depending on what we are feeling.

So that's the middle. But now here's where it gets tricky because in this middle place, you have to pay attention to what you are telling yourself, and here's what I used to tell myself, and here's what I hear my clients tell themselves. Thoughts like, "This is too much. I hate feeling this way. I can't stand it. I need relief. I just got to take the edge off. It's not going to get any better. I'm drowning."

This is what we tell ourselves in the middle about how an emotion actually feels in our body. So what do we do in this middle portion? Well, we start looking for a way to cover up how we feel because we have convinced our self that we can't handle it. So we're feeling stressed out, then we look to have a drink to take the edge off of that stress or anxiety.

If you're feeling awkward, then you pour a drink to try to loosen up. If you're feeling bored, maybe you reach for the bottle of wine to entertain yourself. If you're feeling left out or excluded, maybe you change your order and get that cocktail so that you can feel connected.

The problem is turning to a drink to cover up how you are feeling, to cover up that emotional state, it prevents you from seeing the emotion through to the end. Because remember, there's a beginning, there's a middle, and there is an end. You aren't able to see the emotion dissipate on its own

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because you are rushing to mask and to cover up the feeling and to pretend that you feel differently via a drink.

I want you to consider that the physiological lifespan of an emotion in the body is 90 seconds. All the changes that happen, the tensing, the tightening of muscles, rapid heartbeat, the changes in your breathing, the changes in your digestion, all of that will peak and dissipate on their own. All of those physiological changes will go away if you allow them to.

No change in your body can last forever. Your rapid heartbeat will not last forever. Tensing of a muscle will not last forever. A shallowness of breathing cannot last forever. But now most of us do not experience an emotion for 90 seconds, and I'm sure you might be thinking, 90 seconds, I can handle that. If it was really 90 seconds, it wouldn't be such a problem. But it's not 90 seconds, right? That's what you're thinking right now.

So the question is why do emotions, namely negative emotions, seem to drag on? Seem as if they last for a very long time? Why does it feel like that middle part is just never-ending? So there's a couple reasons. One, you're continuously telling yourself the same story about what is happening. So remember, your thoughts create your feelings, your feelings drive your actions. That's the think-feel-act cycle.

So if you want to understand why you are feeling the way you do, you have to pay attention to the thoughts running through your mind. You can do this easily. Just think about the last thing that you felt stressed or anxious about. Did you think about that thing, whatever it was, let's say maybe it was getting a project done at work. When you are thinking about that project, your thoughts connected to it, "I don't have enough time, how am I going to get it done, this is too much, I haven't been given enough information," did you have these thoughts once or did you think them over and over again?

In essence, were you ruminating and catastrophizing about this circumstance? That is what will keep the emotion lingering, and not just lingering but growing is the story that you are continually telling yourself. So

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that's the first reason why emotions, especially negative ones seem to drag on.

The second reason is whatever story you're telling yourself about the emotion itself. "I hate it, I can't stand it, it's too much, I don't want to feel this way." The emotion that you are feeling, it will color your perception of time and space and frankly, it will make it hard for you to remember a time when you didn't feel that way.

When you are in the midst of feeling bored or anxious or lonely or awkward or annoyed, if you are not challenging yourself, if you are not challenging your thinking, it will be very easy for you to fall into a thought pattern where all you can see is the negative emotion before you and how it's never going to go away.

And then the third reason why negative emotions seem to drag on is because you have unconsciously taught your brain to go look for something to cover up how you feel. And for a lot of you, that might mean having a drink. So coming home from the end of the day, having a lot of negative emotion and teaching your brain oh, the way that I cope with this negative emotion, this stress, this anxiety is to open up a bottle of wine.

But it can happen with lots of things. It can be going to the fridge and getting something to eat so you can kind of numb how you're feeling. It can be distracting yourself on social media, it can be keeping yourself so busy that you don't have time to really feel whatever you're feeling.

Now, most people do some combination of all three of these things. Totally unknowingly. And I did this for a very long time myself. Instead of allowing an emotion to have a beginning and a middle and an end, instead of questioning the story that I had, not only about what was happening but about the emotion itself, instead of witnessing the physiological changes in my body, instead of teaching my brain that actually, I was built and all humans were built to handle any and every emotion, including negative ones, I immediately went to the space of telling myself I couldn't handle it and I needed to find something to cover up how I was feeling.

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And this started for me especially around drinking in social situations. Feeling awkward, feeling insecure, feeling anxious. I, instead of seeing that all of those emotions would have a beginning, a middle, and eventually an end, in that middle point when I was feeling it, I was rushing to cover up. I was rushing for that drink to try to pretend that I could feel differently.

This is what emotional tunnel vision looks like, and it is reinforced, and frankly, made worse every time you reach for a drink or you reach for something to eat to try to cover up and cope with whatever you are feeling. What happens is tunnel vision actually means that you are unknowingly and unwittingly prolonging the very same emotions that you are so desperate to get rid of because you're not letting the emotion get to its natural end point.

You're not teaching your brain that you can withstand whatever you feel. The emotion comes up and you immediately rush to try to cover it up, to mask it, to numb it. But you have to get to that end point, you have to see that you can handle an emotion and that there is a natural end point in order to teach your brain that you are capable of handling whatever you're feeling without a drink in your hand or without turning to something else or some other behavior in your environment to cover up your feelings.

And you know what, this is exactly what my five-year diary showed me, which I had no idea it was going to do. I unknowingly collected all this data that I was having this emotional tunnel vision in the moment, and it was preventing me from really seeing the good moments and experiencing the good moments and understanding that yeah, they're way better than I was giving them credit for when I was experiencing them because I wasn't savoring them, I wasn't seeing them in the big picture.

But also, that the bad moments were so much less significant than I perceived them to be at the time. For the exact same reason, because I wasn't seeing them in the big picture and really understanding that no emotion can last forever. We are built to experience the full spectrum of human emotions, positive and negative, and that I was capable of handling them.

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Even though at this point in my life I wasn't using a drink to cope with my negative emotions anymore, it was very important for me to have this realization that these negative emotions that felt so intense and so bad in the moment that I thought, well, what can I write about today except for this really annoying thing that happened, actually with distance, were not nearly as bad as I had made it out to be in that moment because of the emotional tunnel vision I was having.

Knowing that your emotions have a beginning, a middle, and an end, and knowing that pouring a drink to try to cover up how you feel prevents you from experiencing that natural end point, it prevents that natural dissipation, knowing all of this can start to give you a very different perspective on how to cope with how you're feeling. You can really use the idea that an emotion lasts for 90 seconds, the physiological responses, changes in your body last for 90 seconds to decide how you want to handle it.

So here's what you can start to decide for yourself. When you notice that emotion, when you know that those physiological changes can't last for more than 90 seconds, will you unconsciously talk yourself into a more frenzied state? Will you start to ruminate and catastrophize and think of the worst case scenario? Or will you use the think-feel-act cycle to see and understand how your thoughts are creating how you are feeling in that moment?

During those 90 seconds, will you tell yourself that these physiological sensations, how you are feeling in your body is intolerable and that you must immediately get relief, or will you start the work of practicing observing and witnessing the changes in your body from the perspective of a neutral observer? Really becoming aware of how every emotion expresses itself uniquely in your body without allowing your mind to latch on to this story of how you can't handle it.

During those 90 seconds, will you run to pour a drink, to grab a bar of chocolate, to turn on the TV, to keep yourself busy, to go on the internet, or will you allow the emotion to just be there, to teach your brain that no

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emotion is reason to run and hide and that you can handle however you are feeling?

Because drinking is a habit that covers up how you feel. We turn to it so we can pretend that we are feeling differently. And sometimes it's to cope with that anxiety or awkwardness or loneliness or boredom, and sometimes it is to deal with that sense of missing out and telling ourselves that we can't connect or that we won't have a good time. But either way, there's always an emotion at the root of the habit.

And as long as you turn to a temporary fix like pouring a drink to cover up how you are feeling, you will never see an emotion all the way through. You will have the beginning, you'll get stuck in the middle, but you will never get to the end. You will never start doing work on the root cause. This is what I tell people all the time.

When you take a break from drinking, you allow yourself to create space to actually fix why you were turning to a drink in the first place. We all have this emotional tunnel vision unless we learn the tools of how to coach ourselves, how to see our thoughts and our feelings and our actions differently, we will all have this emotional tunnel vision.

The habit of drinking will make it that much worse because what it does is it just reinforces this belief that you can't handle on your own how you're feeling. You need a drink to connect, you need a drink to have fun, you need a drink to feel confident, you need a drink to not be bored anymore. So you really need not only to witness this tunnel vision at work in your own life but you can start practicing a couple different things to start to get out of it.

First, just notice the desire to have a drink to change how you feel. And practice committing to feeling whatever emotion you are experiencing in that moment when you notice that desire, practice committing to feeling the emotion regardless of what it is. Second, you can notice the story that you are telling yourself about the emotion. "It's too much, I can't take it, it won't go away, I hate feeling this way, I don't want to feel this," notice that story

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and see how that story will keep you not only stuck but always racing to try to find something to cover up how you're feeling.

Third, you can observe the physiological changes in your body. Whatever is connected with an emotion. Now, this is a place where I will tell you, almost everyone that I work with, this is generally a very brand-new concept, the idea that we can observe our emotions, we can notice the changes in our body and we can observe and watch and witness from a distance.

So instead of attaching to the story, we can practice being that neutral observer and just see what it feels like. Because then you can start to say hey, does this story I have about the emotion and how terrible it is and how I'm drowning and I can't handle it and I hate it, does it actually match up with what I'm feeling in my body?

And then finally, you can start to apply the work of the think-feel-act cycle. Find the thought that is creating however you are feeling and see if you can start to challenge it. Can you see what situation you're in in a different light, a new perspective? Can you start to open up your experience? Can you start to open up your perception to maybe think about this situation in a different way?

These four things will help you start getting out of this emotional tunnel vision that is so easy to get stuck in and that is just reinforced and made worse by the habit of drinking. I'll tell you, you may be tremendously surprised at how allowing an emotion to be there not only teaches your brain you don't need a drink to feel better, but that the most effective way to remain in control of what is happening, to remain in control of your feelings and your choices is to allow for that beginning, middle, and end.

Alright everybody, that's all for this week. Have a wonderful day.

Hey guys, if you're finding this podcast helpful, and I really hope you are, I would love if you would head on over to iTunes and leave a review. And as a special thank you, I've updated and expanded my free urge meditation

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give away. I've created two audio meditations plus a brand-new workbook that will teach you a different way to respond to the urge to drink. The meditations are super simple. All it takes is five minutes and a pair of headphones, and each one now comes with a follow up exercise in the workbook to help you dig deeper and really retrain your brain when it comes to the habit of drinking.

So after you leave a review on iTunes, all you need to do is head on over to rachelhart.com/urge. Input your information and I'll make sure you get a copy of both meditations plus the workbook in your inbox.

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.