

Ep #105: Mastering the Urge to Drink



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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 105.

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 going to talk about mastering the urge to drink today. I talk about urges a lot on the podcast, but I really want to dive in deep on this one because I really do feel like so many of you get kind of stuck at the same place, and I want to help you understand why that is.

So, let's just start with what an urge is. An urge is just the desire to drink that has been habituated; it has been turned into a habit. Your brain learns to expect a reward because you taught it to want one. Now, when people tell me that they're trying to change their drinking, they will say that the urge is the problem.

So, I'll hear this all the time, "If I didn't have the urge to drink then I could say no." But I want you to know something; the urge to drink, the urge to do anything for that matter, is not your problem. I know it feels that way, but that's not what the problem is. The problem is how you respond to an urge.

Now, I teach this in four parts. The first part is pausing, because if you can't pause, if you're immediately acting on that urge, you can't examine it. So you have to pause in order to see what is there. The second step is to listen and watch.

There is a story that your brain has about the urge itself and you have to listen and watch in order to find out what that story is. A lot of times, it sounds like this, "I hate it. It's terrible. I can't stand it. It's so uncomfortable. I need it to go away." So, the ability to listen and watch will give you insight into that story.

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Step three is to neutralize it. Neutralize the urge. Take it from that really intense story to actually just what it feels like in your body, to really be able to observe that urge objectively. And then the fourth step is to travel into the future with that urge. Where is that urge and obeying that urge going to take you? And I'm going to break down all four of these steps today.

Now, pausing, the first step, is pretty self-explanatory because if you feel the urge to drink and then drink, and if you feel to urge to drink and then drink, if you do that over and over and over again, there is very little space between actually feeling that desire and your brain getting a reward. And the least amount of space there is, you can't really see what's happening in your brain.

And it's why the habit feels so fast and so automatic, because there's almost no space between that urge appearing, your desire appearing, and the brain getting the reward. You need to create the space. That's what pausing does.

This is work of inquiry. You want to inquire what's going on, what is fueling the habit. And you cannot develop and create inquiry if there's nothing to look at.

So what does pausing look like? Now, to begin with, I'll tell you what pausing doesn't look like. It does not look like counting down the minutes and the seconds until you can drink, because when you are doing that, you're not looking at the urge, you're not looking at what's happening, you're focusing on the reward.

So any pause you take has to be a pause of curiosity. You're looking to find out information about the urge. And the information that you're looking for is always your thinking. That's how the think-feel-act cycle works. Remember, your thoughts create a feeling and that feeling drives an action.

In this case, I'm talking about thoughts such as, "I want it. That looks good. Can I have some?" These thoughts create desire, and that desire you have motivates the action of drinking. Now, the good news is that while your

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think-feel-act cycles may have previously all unfolded on autopilot where you didn't have a lot of awareness, once you understand how the cycle works, once you understand the importance of a pause when your desire appears, you can start to intervene with it and change it.

And furthermore, just because you think a thought or feel the desire or the urge to drink, doesn't mean that you have to act on that thought or act on that desire. The think-feel-act cycle will unfold that way unless you choose to question it. But the good news is that you have free will. You don't have to just keep your default thinking. You can make a choice about what to do.

So, for most people, before they discover the think-feel-act cycle, making that choice about what to do feels really difficult because the urge itself can kind of feel like a mystery. I'll tell you, I was so sure that what was creating my desire was not the think-feel-act cycle, was not the thoughts in my mind. I didn't know anything about that for a long time. I was just completely positive that alcohol was creating my desire.

And so I thought the only way to avoid my desire was to avoid alcohol, which proved to be really difficult because alcohol was something that was around me quite a bit. So I felt like I was just plagued with my desire and I had no recourse. I was stuck. It was something that I was going to have to resist and fight against for my entire life.

But once you learn that your thoughts create your feelings and your feelings, that desire, is what is driving the action of drinking, all of a sudden, you have a framework to start to understand and, more importantly, change the habit because you don't have to isolate yourself from alcohol. You have to start understanding the thoughts creating your desire and see if you can start to shift them and change them so, no longer are you at the mercy of this mysterious thing; you have a framework to start to change it.

So a pause is not counting down the minutes or the seconds until you can have a drink. A pause is really looking at your mind and understanding what is that think-feel-act cycle that is fueling the habit. It can be any

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amount of time; five minutes, 10 minutes, 30 minutes. It can be a pause for an entire night, because here's the thing, alcohol isn't going anywhere.

You can always choose to have it later. And I'll tell you, a lot of clients that I work with, they actually use that thought, "I can always have it later. I can always have it tomorrow..." to help them strengthen the muscle of pausing.

Now, you're going to notice your brain being really insistent, "I need this now. I've got to have it now. I want it now." But when you start to practice the thought that alcohol will always be there, it's not going anywhere, it's not going to disappear in the next 24 hours, it takes some of the urgency away.

Now, here's what people discover when they start practicing a pause, and a pause that isn't just counting down the seconds and the minutes until they can have a drink. You discover that an urge can't last forever.

Now, there's good reason behind this, because your brain wants to be efficient. The human brain evolved to save energy. So calling out for something, calling out for a drink forever over and over and over again, it wastes a lot of energy if you're not fulfilling, if you're not answering that call.

And it's why so many people will tell me if they notice, if they make it past a certain point in the night – let's say the urge appears at 5pm because that's when you've taught your brain to expect the reward – if they make it through dinner, that urge has likely disappeared. Or maybe you discovered that the urge to drink is really strong for the first 30 minutes of the party, but once you get past that first 30 minutes, it pretty much subsides.

The brain is not going to call out for something forever. Now, if that has not been your experience, I'm going to explain why that is. If you have found that the urge is not subsiding, it is most likely because you are still spending a lot of energy deciding what to do. Am I going to drink tonight? Am I not going to drink tonight? Should I say yes? Should I say no?

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So your brain is constantly going back and forth, it's doing this little ping pong match in this endless conversation about what to do because you haven't made a commitment ahead of time. And that endless back and forth will take up so much space in your brain because, essentially, you're wavering.

You haven't made a commitment. You're giving your brain a lot of space to are about what to do. And that is why it is always easier to make a commitment rather than sit and decide in the moment, because when you make a commitment, you're not giving yourself the space to ping pong back and forth.

But if you pause, if you decide ahead of time what you're going to do and then you practice pausing, you are going to give yourself the opportunity to see that an urge will subside. But now, here's the trick; you can't just try to distract yourself during the pause. You can't just try to fill up the time with something else.

You actually have to move towards the urge because you can't change what you can't see, and that's what a lot of people miss when they're just trying to distract themselves. They're not able to see the think-feel-act cycle at work.

So that first step is pausing. Once you pause, that is where listening comes in, this second step. What is your brain telling you about the urge? It probably sounds something like this, "I hate it. It's so uncomfortable. This sucks. It feels terrible. I don't want to have this urge."

Your brain is inserting so much drama into the story of what is happening. But I'm going to tell you this; that's not what's really going on. I always ask people, when they start to tell me the story that they uncover about the urge, "I hate it, it's so uncomfortable. It's terrible. I just need it to go away..." I always ask people, well tell me exactly what is so terrible about an urge in your body? What specifically is the problem?

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And you know, for most people, when they really try to answer that question and they don't just stop at this line of thinking it's terrible to feel an urge and not answer it with your desire, for most people, it kind of stumps them, this question of what's so terrible about the urge, because they've really never taken the time to question their story. They just believe what their brain is telling them word for word.

But really understanding that what your brain is telling you is just a story with a lot of drama added to it, that piece of the puzzle really matters. You've heard me talk about, on this podcast before, the idea that the urge is your lower-brain really throwing a tantrum. It wants what it wants and it wants it now. It doesn't care about anything else. It's like a toddler in your mind.

So imagine when a child wants something. Imagine their pleas and their stories. What would happen if you believed everything that that child was telling you? "I want it. I need it. This is terrible. I'm going to die." That's what the child wants to say. Imagine if you believed that story. Oh my gosh, you're going to die if you don't get your way? This is the worst thing ever? Oh my god, I didn't know that...

The reason why we don't believe what a toddler or a child is telling us is because we can be an objective observer. We're able to see, you know what, not getting what you want is not going to kill you. It is not the end of the world. It is not the most terrible thing that has ever befallen you. You are going to survive.

You are going to survive not getting that piece of candy, having your phone taken away, whatever it is. When you pause and listen to the story that your brain wants you to believe about the urge, you can start to question it in the same way, because not having a drink is simply never the end of the world. It never is.

Once you listen to the story that your brain is telling you, you can start to watch what is actually happening in your body. If it feels so terrible to say

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no to an urge, then we should be able to locate this terrible sensation and you should be able to describe it with great detail.

But I have an urge meditation that I talk about on this podcast a lot. There are two meditations, actually, that you can get for free. So these urge meditations, when people use them and they start to observe what is actually happening in their body and describe what an urge feels like, I often have people say, “I’m not sure I’m doing it right because I’m not noticing a whole lot happening. I’m not noticing a ton of discomfort in my body. It doesn’t really seem like there’s a lot going on beyond a little restlessness.

And I want to tell you, you’re doing it right, because here’s what you’re going to discover when you start to really look at the story that your brain is telling you about an urge and not answering an urge and what is actually happening in your body; they don’t match up. It’s just a little bit of restlessness.

All that drama in the story does not match up with what is actually happening in your body. You can handle feeling a little restless. That’s what an urge feels like for most people when they really tune into what’s happening.

Honestly, I think it’s kind of like being stuck on an airplane. So if you can imagine yourself sitting in a small confined seat for several hours and your body wants to move, you feel restless, you would like to get up and probably get off the plane, but you can’t really move around that much. You can maybe walk to the bathroom and back, but you can’t really stretch out your body.

So you can tell yourself the facts of that story; I was in an airplane, I was sitting in the seat for four hours, it was cramped, I was only able to get up twice to go to the bathroom. But doing so was totally worth it because that’s how I got to my destination. So you can tell the facts of that story, or you can tell the story of being on the plane was so much drama.

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“Oh my god, it was the worst seat. It was so uncomfortable. I barely had any room. There was barely any legroom. I had to sit there forever. I couldn’t get up. I hated my seatmate. It was so unbearable.”

Watching your mind and the story in your mind and comparing it to what is happening in your body, the actual physical sensations of the urge actually neutralizes what is happening because, suddenly, this no good horrible very bad situation is not that big of a deal. The thing that your brain is telling you, “It feels terrible, I hate it...” it’s really just a little bit of restlessness.

So these three steps alone are huge; pausing, listening, and watching. It teaches your brain that you don’t have to automatically act, you don’t have to immediately pour a drink when you feel desire. You listen to that story, you listen to all the drama, and then you watch what’s actually unfolding in your body. And you’re able to really neutralize the urge itself, so you are compounding having an urge with all this added drama.

But now, here’s where a lot of people get stuck. So you do all this work to really pause and watch your brain, watch those think-feel-act cycles unfold, really understand your urge in a very different light, without all this drama, and people will tell me this, “Okay, Rachel, I get it. I know it won’t kill me. I know that the urge is not even all that uncomfortable when I really pay attention. I know I’m not going to die if I don’t have a drink. I can totally handle it. I can totally survive. But you know what, I don’t want to. I don’t want to say no to an urge.”

It’s so interesting to watch people get to this point. I see it happen all the time. They start the pause, they do the listening, they do all the watching, they totally dismantled the story that they can’t handle it. So they start to understand, “I can handle it, and it’s not even that big of a deal, but I don’t want to.”

And when I explore this with people, when I explore this thought, I don’t want to, I usually hear the following reasons for why you don’t want to say

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no to an urge. First is this reason; I've put up with so much all day long and I just don't want to be uncomfortable right now.

Now, listen, if you can relate to this, this is why I am always telling you that your emotional wellbeing matters so much when you're trying to change the habit of drinking, because if you're drinking to escape how you feel, even a low-level emotion, it doesn't have to be a big huge terrible thing, if you're drinking to escape how you feel, if you are trying to change your drinking but you're not doing anything to feel better overall, you're always going to come up short in these moments.

You're always going to say, "But I put up with so much all day long. I don't want to be uncomfortable anymore. You have got to do that work. It's the deeper work of changing your emotional wellbeing. And the second reason why I'll hear people say, "I know I can survive it, I know I can say no, I just don't want to..." is because people feel like saying no to a desire is unfair.

"It's unfair that I have to say no to my desire and everybody else can have whatever they want and it's unfair that this is my problem that I have to work on and I have to struggle with and nobody else does and it's just plain old unfair all around, and you know what, I don't want to say no because I'm annoyed that it's unfair."

I want you to really look at both of these reasons and see that beneath both of them is this assumption that you should be able to have whatever you want when you want it. And if that doesn't happen, then something has gone terribly wrong. But I'm going to tell you this; nothing has gone wrong.

Nothing has gone wrong when your brain wants something and you make the decision to say no. You are not actually meant to have whatever you want when you want it. And that's just not unique to you; I believe that's true for everyone.

That is not the point of life, to just fulfill all our wants whenever we want them. The point of life is to overcome that primitive animal brain; that lower-brain that only cares about rewards. It doesn't care about the future. It

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doesn't care about tomorrow. It doesn't weigh any pros and cons; it just wants the reward.

Listen, that part of your brain is not the point of life. The point of life is to use your human brain, the prefrontal cortex, the part of your brain that allows humans to do amazing things, that allows humans to overcome their primitive animal selves. That is the part of the brain that took humans from a life of purely survival and instinct to a life of creation, making art, making music, having a language, being able to write, and most importantly, being able to bring ideas to life.

That really is the point. It's not to have whatever you want whenever you want it. That is the mandate of the lower-brain. And I'll tell you, it's not going to create the life that you want. This really is the last step to mastering an urge. After you have done the work of pausing, of listening, of watching, now you have the step to really understand, "Well, let's travel into the future. Let's see where this urge is going to take me. Let's see where life is going to take me when I just focus on having whatever I want when I want it."

You really have to ask yourself, ask your brain, "Okay, so you want a drink; so what?" What's the big deal with wanting something and then saying no? So instead of seeing that urge as a problem, you can start to see how it can really help you. Who do you become when you teach your brain that you don't need to be ruled by its base desires, desires that don't serve you, desires that are only creating negative consequences for you, desires that only perpetuate themselves. Because, of course, the more you say yes to the desire to drink, the more you want to drink.

Not only that, but which part of your brain is the part of your brain saying, "I want it, I want it, I need it?" Is it that higher-brain? Is it that part of your brain that cares about tomorrow and your future and your dreams and what you want to create and how you're going to feel? Or, is it your lower-brain?

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And what will happen if you let that thought, “I want it...” rule your life? I’ll tell you what; you’ll become a slave to it. You will give yourself permission to just blindly follow the habit.

Now, here’s the thing; if the habit was serving you, then none of this would be a problem. Blindly follow the habit. If it was serving you, by all means, but it’s not. The reason why you want to change your drinking is because the habit is creating negative consequences for you.

This really is the last step. You travel into the future with the thought, “I want it.” And you ask yourself, where does obeying this thought, where does it take me? And will it ever subside on its own if you just continually say yes?

I’m going to tell you this; it won’t. It will not subside on its own when every time you are met with the urge to drink, you say yes. The more you fuel that thought with a concentrated reward, the more your brain will think that acting on that thought, I want it, is incredibly important because your brain was designed to seek out rewards in your environment. It’s not humans survived.

The problem is, your survival is no longer on the line. You’re no longer in the position where every day you have to expend a ton of energy just to make sure that you can keep living. But your lower-brain has not caught up. Your lower-brain still thinks that these rewards are incredibly important, but they’re not.

So the question for you really is do you want a life run by a toddler? Because, you know what, toddlers have very strong ideas of what they want and pretty much zero idea of what is good for them. That is a life run by a lower-brain. That is a life run by just saying yes to your base desires.

This is how you master the urge to drink; You teach your brain over and over again that wanting isn’t a good enough reason because you have bigger and better plans for what you’re going to use your brain to do than just spending all day blindly seeking out the reward to drink.

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Pause, listen, watch, and travel into the future. That's how you master the urge to drink. Alright, everybody, that's all for today. I'll see you next week.

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 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.