

Ep #107: Loving Your Lower Brain to Change Your Drinking



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Rachel Hart

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #107: Loving Your Lower Brain to Change Your Drinking

You are listening to the *Take A Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, episode 107.

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 hello everybody. So today I want to revisit the analogy of the toddler and your lower brain being a toddler in your mind and throwing a tantrum when you say no to the urge. I think it's a really important analogy for you to really wrap your head around, but I watch a lot of people miss something really, really key when it comes to thinking about your lower brain, thinking about the part of the brain that really only cares about finding pleasure, avoiding pain, doing it as efficiently as possible, the part of your brain where the habit resides. I see a lot of you making a mistake about how you are interacting with that toddler.

So here's the thing; when you say no to an urge, especially at first, it will feel a little bit like your brain is throwing a tantrum. Now, the part of this work that I think is incredibly powerful at first is just the idea that you don't have to listen to that tantrum. All of those thoughts, "But I want it, I need it, everyone else is, it's Friday, it's free, I need to take the edge off, I need a break, I deserve it," all of it, you don't have to listen to the toddler, and that alone is kind of mind-blowing. It was for me. The idea that I didn't have to listen to my brain.

And I think it's important to think about it in terms of a toddler, a little kid making all these claims, all these justifications, all these excuses because a lot of you can see, a lot of you who are parents and have children can think about like, what would happen if you just listened to all the pleas of your children? When they were telling you like, "Oh mom, it's so unfair, I'm going to die if I don't get this pair of sneakers, you don't understand what fifth grade is like."

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #107: Loving Your Lower Brain to Change Your Drinking

Whatever it is that your kid wants, what would happen if we listened to all the pleas of our children, of the toddlers? They do not know what is best for them. They really don't. So when you start to really understand this, you get wise to your brain. You start to see all these permission-giving thoughts that - what I call the Rolodex of excuses, you start to see all of it.

And that's a really good thing because when you see those thoughts, you can start to really watch that think-feel-act cycle unfold. You can start to see how your decision to drink was not this mysterious thing that just happened. It was an action that you took based on a feeling that was created by a thought. That's what happens when you start doing this work and realizing, yeah, I don't have to listen to what my brain is saying, I can start to look at it and examine it and question it and challenge it.

Now, here's the problem. This is the problem that I see with people. All of a sudden you start judging it. Now, notice what I said before. You can notice, you can question, you can challenge, you can observe. Notice that I didn't include judging as one of the things that you can do. But this is what happens so often with my clients. It's something that I watch myself do as well at first.

It was like, we start to hear the messages that our brain is giving us about why it really is a good idea to have a drink and all the justifications and all the excuses, and we immediately switch into, "Ugh, I hate my brain. What's wrong with my brain? It's so stupid, why is it such a problem?"

So this really is where a lot of people will start to get stuck because when you are hating your brain, when you are blaming your brain, when you are hating the fact that the thoughts are appearing, when you tell yourself it feels like the brain is working against you and it's too smart or it's too persistent or you just need it to shut up, you become at the mercy of your lower brain.

I can't succeed unless that toddler shuts up. But the problem is you start judging, you start hating, and what are you doing? You're creating a lot of negative emotion for yourself. Now, if you have listened to me on this

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #107: Loving Your Lower Brain to Change Your Drinking

podcast, you know that negative emotion can actually fuel the habit of drinking. Why often do we turn to a drink? Because we want to feel differently.

So creating more negative emotion for yourself, not going to be helpful. There's a reason why your brain wants a reward. First, it was designed that way. All human brains evolved to seek out rewards in the environment. It's part of human survival. And two, you taught it to want one.

Now, you may not have understood what you were doing at the time, but it is something that you made a choice about. And now, this is no reason to beat yourself up. I actually think this is really powerful for you to step into the fact that you taught your brain to expect a reward. Because if you taught your brain to expect a reward, you can also teach your brain something new.

I want to talk a little bit about how the brain evolved, evolved to seek out rewards in the environment. So for almost all of human existence, humans lived in an environment where survival was not a given. It was not easy. The world was dangerous. Staying alive, avoiding predators, hunting and foraging for food, finding clean water, building shelter to stay warm and protected, all of that took massive amounts of energy.

Back then, humans were using so much energy just to stay alive compared to today. Think about it today. How much of your day have you spent running from predators or hunting your food, or foraging or constructing your home? You're not spending a lot of energy these days just surviving. But that's what it was like for the human brain thousands of years ago.

So the brain evolved in two important ways to really help humans survive in this type of environment. One, it developed habits. Habits are incredibly useful because they allow humans to be very efficient. They allow us to take action without having to use a lot of conscious thought. They save energy. The brain was built to run on habits. The problem is that the brain does not care so much if the habits are good or bad. It just cares about being efficient.

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #107: Loving Your Lower Brain to Change Your Drinking

The other way that the brain evolved was really learning, how do I learn how to maximize contact with beneficial things and minimize contact with harm? It learned how to do that through rewards. So the brain really evolved to have this built in reward system so when we found something that was useful for survival, the brain got a little bit of dopamine.

Dopamine is just that chemical messenger in the brain that creates the feeling of enjoyment, but it is also a chemical messenger that really helped humans understand how do I maximize contact with good things, beneficial things, and how do I minimize contact with harm.

So the brain finds something in the environment that provides dopamine and it's like, oh hey, I should remember this, I just got this nice pleasant feeling in my brain, this is important, this is important for survival. So you can think about this. You can think about this like eating a grape. It's a little bit of sugar, you get a little bit of dopamine. It's like a little packet of energy.

The brain thinks, oh this is good, I should remember this, I should eat this again, this is important for survival. Now, humans evolved with this built in rewards system, but we also have a prefrontal cortex, and guess what the prefrontal cortex can do? It can come up with, it can dream up ideas and figure out how to execute them. And guess what one of those ideas was?

Sometimes, I notice that things ferment, and when they ferment, they take on different properties. I wonder if I can harness fermentation. I wonder if I can start to make these things that naturally will happen in the wild, things will ferment, fruit will ferment, and you can watch animals get intoxicated eating fermented fruit. I wonder if I can harness this so that I can have the enjoyment and the pleasure of having this fermented liquid whenever I wanted.

There you go, there's wine. We did it with lots of things. We did it with drugs. But suddenly, now the brain is coping with a whole different amount of reward because the reward you get from eating a grape does not compare to the reward you get from fermenting grapes and it concentrates it. It creates a really concentrated reward.

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #107: Loving Your Lower Brain to Change Your Drinking

But the brain has not caught up. Your brain still thinks like, this is really important and I should remember this, it's important for survival. So remember that. I want you to really remember that this is how the brain evolved. And once you understand this, you can start to understand why you have developed a habit.

Now, there is the additional issue that we now today live in a reward-saturated environment. So in our modern world where we do not have to expend very much energy trying to survive, we have also figured out, we have used our higher brain to figure out how to create a wealth of things that provide quick, easy concentrated reward.

So besides alcohol and drugs, food is now processed and refined and served in super-size portions, and we have one click shopping and on demand entertainment and we have limitless porn. We have all these very, very easy rewards, concentrated rewards in our environment. And so now the lower brain has to deal with that as well.

So you have to understand that evolutionary piece, you have to understand that part of why your brain is seeking out rewards is that it evolved that way. It thinks it's being helpful. But you have to also understand that the reason why your brain wants the reward of alcohol is because you taught it to want it. You said yes, you made that decision.

Now listen, this really is good news. I said it before, but if you taught your brain a habit, you can teach it something new. This is what is amazing about the human brain is that it has the ability to constantly rewire itself. You can replace habits that don't serve you with habits that do serve you. Your lower brain may not when it is forming habits, be taking into account, oh, is this a good habit or a bad habit. It's just noticing, oh hey, this habit gives me a reward.

But you are not just a lower brain. You have that higher brain. You can start to ask yourself and question, is this habit serving me, and if it's not, can I teach myself, can I learn how to create one that is. So now you've got a brain that evolved to seek out rewards and you have a habit that you

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #107: Loving Your Lower Brain to Change Your Drinking

created. You may not have known that you were creating it, you may not have known that that habit was in large part being driven by wanting to change how you were feeling. But you have a habit that you created, and you're living in a reward-saturated environment.

So think about this. You've got that lower brain that only cares about finding pleasure, avoiding pain, and doing so efficiently. But you also have that higher brain that cares about your future, your dreams. It has ideas. It wants to execute them. It has goals. It wants to find its purpose. It wants to use its life for something, your life for something.

But you also have the ability to watch both parts of your brain. You can watch all of this unfold. You can watch that think-feel-act cycle at work. You can watch your permission-giving thoughts. This is really the power of what I am offering to you is your ability to observe your own brain, your ability to observe the habit. Your ability to observe and question and understand and ultimately, change why are you making the decision to drink. It does not just happen.

But now, here's where people are getting stuck. What are you going to do with all this information? You know what a lot of you are doing? "I am going to yell at my brain, I am going to tell my brain to make it stop, I'm going to say shut up, shut up, shut up, shut up, I hate you, go away." Listen, this is what you guys are doing so often with the toddler. You are so mean. I was too.

When I started to understand this, I was like, "Ugh, these stupid thoughts. If I didn't have these stupid thoughts I wouldn't have this stupid habit, I hate everything." This is what we do. I watch people do this over and over and over again and of course, guess what all of these thoughts are creating for you. A lot of negative emotion.

I want you to really think about this. What do you think is the best course of action when you're dealing with a toddler? Do you think it is to tell them to shut up and that you hate them and that they are stupid? I really want you to think about this.

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #107: Loving Your Lower Brain to Change Your Drinking

Now, I know some of you are like, sometimes I think that when I'm dealing with my three-year-old, but I really want you - use your higher brain. What does your higher brain tell you is the best course of action? I have a story that I've actually been thinking about a lot recently because I think that it is such a good visual for how I want this to unfold for me and my life.

So I grew up in Connecticut. I love winter. I miss winter a lot now that I'm living in San Francisco, but I remember, one of my earliest memories is going sledding with my family. I am the youngest. There is a joke in the family that still goes on even though I am 38 years old that I am the baby.

So I have this really vivid memory of going sledding when I was pretty young. I must have been probably three, with my family, and there was a hill that kind of went down right next to our driveway and there had been snow and my parents took us out and we were all sledding. And a couple times - I had my whole snowsuit on, you can imagine, totally bundled up. A couple times, I would sled down the hill, which of course was amazing and so much fun and I loved it.

And when I would get to the bottom, my father would come and kind of drag me back up the hill, pulling the sled. So I got a free ride up to the top of the hill. And I remember, I have such a vivid memory of this, of sledding down the hill and kind of waiting for that ride. Like, okay, who's going to drag me back up the hill? I'm waiting.

And my parents said, "Rachel, you need to walk back up yourself with the sled." And I was so mad. That is really the memory that I have of being really angry for the first time in my life like, what are you people talking about? What do you mean I have to walk back up the hill? Are you crazy? No way. This is impossible. This hill is covered in snow. This sled is bigger than me. What are you talking about?

I mean, just throwing a fit. And my parents were not like, "Hey, stupid, get up the hill. We hate you." They listened to everything, all my complaints, all of my whining, I couldn't do it, it was too hard, it was so unfair, how could

Ep #107: Loving Your Lower Brain to Change Your Drinking

you do this to me, and they let me have my tantrum and they said, "Yeah, you need to walk up the hill."

Now listen, I know that some of you out there may have had parents that said, "Get up the hill, you stupid idiot." But even if that is the case, when you're thinking about that toddler and you're thinking about that toddler throwing a fit and saying, it's so hard, it's unfair, I can't do it, I'm never going to figure this out, it's impossible, is that how you want to respond? Now that you can make the decision about how you want to treat yourself - you're not a child anymore - now that you can make that decision, how do you want to behave towards yourself?

And that lower brain, that part of you that thinks the most important thing is to just get the reward and have it done as easily as possible. My toddler self in that moment was like, listen I just want to do the sledding part. That's amazing and fun and it's also amazing when dad drags me back up the hill, that is what I want.

I want you to think about that. How do you want to behave towards that part of yourself? I think most of us, I hope all of us when we really spend some time thinking about how do we want to treat that lower brain, how do we want to treat the toddler inside of us, we know that we don't want to call it stupid and an idiot and hate it. And that hating it and yelling at it actually probably isn't going to be that effective.

You have to love the toddler. You have to love your lower brain. Your lower brain is actually very important. It helps you survive. Sometimes it helps you try to survive in moments when your survival is not actually at stake. But that's why you have your higher brain. That's why you have that prefrontal cortex.

That lower brain, it can be really freaked out, it sees danger everywhere it looks, it can be terrified of those negative emotions, it can continue to believe that all rewards are super important, but it's just confused. You don't have to yell at it. You don't have to hate it. You don't have to judge it.

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #107: Loving Your Lower Brain to Change Your Drinking

You can just have that toddler be there with all her pleas and it can be okay.

And I love hearing when my clients start to really understand this, when they start to see an urge come up. So they see the thought like, "Oh, I should go to the liquor store, it's Friday, shouldn't I have a drink? Headed to a party, maybe I'm having some wine." They see that urge come up and they're just like oh hey, I see you. I know you think that we're going to drink right now but you're confused. We're doing something different.

There's just so much calmness in how they respond. They're not freaking out. They're not also yelling at these thoughts to be like, go away, I hate you, you're so stupid, you're ruining my life. That's what you can start to do. The toddler doesn't have to go away for you to be successful. You don't get rid of your lower brain because you know what, you get to keep it. You keep your lower brain.

So my internal toddler, it doesn't jabber on about drinking anymore because it has learned that I am not going to reward the tantrum with something to drink. But she has a lot to say about my business, she has a lot to say about any time I put something new out into the world. She has a lot to say and it's cool. She is kind of freaked out and pretty sure that we're going to die and that I can't do it and that we're not going to be successful.

But my work is just to love her. Just to let her be there, let her have her little freak out. I don't have to freak out in response. I see her as that little girl at the bottom of a snowy hill who is totally bundled up in a snowsuit and really, really believes, really, really thinks that she cannot make it up the hill, it is too hard, it is so unfair, why have these terrible people done this to her? She really thinks it is the end of the world.

But the thing is my parents knew she just doesn't know what she's capable of yet. She just doesn't know that she is able to trudge up the hill. She can do it. That's how I see my lower brain. I don't hate her. I love her. I practice loving her. And that's what I want to offer to you guys.

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart

Ep #107: Loving Your Lower Brain to Change Your Drinking

You don't have to hate that part of you that is freaking out, that is making the excuses, that is bringing out the Rolodex, all the justifications, all the pleas. You don't have to hate it, you don't have to judge it, you don't have to call it names. You don't have to even silence it. You just have to be able to let it happen and just say oh, you just don't know what we're capable of yet. You're just at the bottom of the snowy hill. You're going to make it to the top.

Alright everybody, that's all for today. I will see you guys 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.

[Take a Break From Drinking](#) with Rachel Hart