

## Ep #109: The Learning Trap



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With Your Host

**Rachel Hart**

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## Ep #109: The Learning Trap

You are listening to the *Take A Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, episode 109.

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.

Alright guys, so I want to start doing a new segment here where I'm going to answer your questions in an episode. So I hope for all of you who have questions, you've been wanting to reach out, ask, find my opinion, hear from me about what I have to say that you will send me an email at [podcast@rachelhart.com](mailto:podcast@rachelhart.com). You can of course do this completely anonymously, but I would love to just have a space and a forum where I'm able to answer your questions.

Alright so, let's talk about the learning trap today. It's such an important thing and it's something that I watch so many of my clients fall into this trap. Now, when I first discovered the think-feel-act cycle, it really did blow my mind. It really was earth-shattering for me because suddenly, I had this framework to explain why it was that I was drinking.

This action, this decision that had felt sometimes not even like a decision, had felt so mysterious, all of a sudden, I had this framework to understand why it was happening. There was always a thought and a feeling attached to it, and the more I repeated that cycle, the more habitual it became.

And so I became a woman obsessed. I started studying how habits work in the brain, I started learning about cognitive science and how you can actually rewire your brain, you can actually overwrite old habits, habits that aren't serving you with new ones, and I started learning about how the brain evolved.

This piece in evolution is really important because how the brain evolved really colors, really affects how we think today. I've talked about this a lot

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on the podcast but it's why we often have so many negative thought patterns and why we're so good at spotting problems and so good at spotting danger, which really helped us when humans were living in a very dangerous world and there was danger all around us, but it's not so helpful for most of us today.

So, you know, I threw myself into this work and I love learning about it. I still love learning about it. And I'll hear the same thing from you guys, so you guys will write to me and say, oh my god, I can't believe I never knew about this, I'm so fascinated, I'm going back to your podcast and I'm listening from start to where we are now, I'm listening to them over and over, I'm reading books, I'm taking notes, I'm journaling, I'm doing all the stuff.

So when I hear this, when I hear people telling me all of the learning they are doing, which don't get me wrong is great, I always ask them, yeah, but are you taking action? And especially when I'm talking to my clients, I do a lot of coaching over video. I'll be able to see their face and they'll get that kind of sheepish look like, well, not yet, Rachel, I'm not yet taking action, I'm not yet trying to change my drinking, I'm not yet doing all the things you talk about doing because I'm still absorbing all this information, I'm still taking it all in, I still feel like I have to learn more.

Which of course, that's a trap. That's what I want to talk to you about today. I want to talk to you how learning can become a trap, why it happens, and how to make sure you don't fall into this cycle because it really is something that people will get caught in for such a long time because it feels so virtuous to keep learning and understanding and reading and exploring all these things but not actually taking action.

So let's talk about this for a second. Why do we love to learn? Why is that? Humans are driven to understand the world around them. We are driven to understand how things work. Humans are always trying to understand our environment, who we are, our place in the universe. We have so many questions.

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I mean, just think about all the questions you ask yourself all day long. Why did I do that? Why did I say that? Why did he do that? Why did he say that? How does this work? How can I figure this out? We're asking questions all day long. Questions are incredibly powerful in the brain.

I talk about this in episode 48, all about questions and how they work in the brain. If you haven't checked that episode out, I really want you to go back and listen. But a question really puts your brain to work. When you ask your brain a question, it goes on a mission to find an answer.

So the problem sometimes is that the brain is primed to answer questions negatively. Why does this happen? It's a really simple reason. Because of human evolution. We are primed to spot danger, to see problems, to see what could be dire, what's not working because it helped humans survive.

So you have to pay attention to that when you're really understanding how questions work in the brain. But questions really are a byproduct of the fact that humans are hardwired to be curious. And you know I love curiosity. I talk about that emotion being a superpower. I really believe that it is a superpower of mine because curiosity and wanting to understand how things work and being really inquisitive with the world around me is something that I really do believe that I have cultivated and has helped me quite a bit.

I mean, think about it. You have this too. When people are given a trivia question, it's fascinating. Scientists have done research on this and they have shown when people are given a trivia question, the reward centers in the brain light up. So figuring out the answer to a question is so deeply satisfying because we get a little bit of dopamine.

New information and answers to problems, they stimulate the brain in the same way as other rewards. Rewards that we get from food and from sex, and of course, from alcohol. And it makes sense when you start thinking about human evolution because the more information you have about your environment, the better equipped you will be to survive.

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If you know the right plants to forage and the locations of clean water and how to build a shelter, you will be able to live. It will help you survive, not only having information but figuring out the answers to your questions. So learning is inherently pleasurable. The brain evolved that way to make it pleasurable, to help humans learn how to survive.

And it's why when I learned about the think-feel-act cycle and when so many of you learned this framework for the first time, it's so deeply satisfying because drinking for so long, it felt like this mystery to me. Like, why did I do it? Why was it that I went for that next glass and another? Why would I promise myself that I was going to be "good" tonight and never follow through?

My actions around alcohol felt so mysterious. I didn't know why I had so much desire. I didn't know why my drinking was unpredictable. I didn't know why it was hard to say no. And the think-feel-act cycle, it gave me the answer.

All of a sudden, I could see that my action, the decision to drink didn't exist in a vacuum. There were thoughts and feelings connected to it and when I learned that framework, there was pleasure. It was pleasurable to really find an answer. I had the pleasure of watching my brain and my mind expand, grow, start to understand the world around me, start to understand myself better. That was deeply pleasurable.

So if learning is this really pleasurable thing, and you know, so virtuous, what's wrong with just learning more information and understanding ourselves better? What's possible wrong with that? Well, the problem is when you learn at your own expense. When you are learning and learning and listening to podcasts and reading books and journaling and journaling and journaling, but you're doing it in order to hide and avoid from uncomfortable emotions.

Because learning feels good. It feels good really allowing your brain to expand. It feels good solving problems. But you can do that at the expense of yourself. You can do that as a way to numb yourself. I talk about

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numbing a lot. Numbing is simply any action, any action that helps you avoid experiencing a negative emotion.

And I talk about numbing - there's a whole episode on it. Episode number 90. But I talk about how you can really numb yourself with anything. Now, a lot of times it looks like overdrinking. Using alcohol to take the edge off or to cover up how you feel with stress or anxiety or awkwardness or loneliness.

But it can also manifest in overeating or overspending or overworking. The overworking one blows a lot of people's mind. The idea that you can work as a way to numb yourself. But listen, if you're keeping yourself so busy all the time that you literally don't have a spare moment to yourself, guess what, it's a way to avoid what you're thinking and how you're feeling.

You can also numb yourself with technology. TVs, computers, phones, social media, Netflix. All of those things. They take up brain space so you don't have to pay attention to how you're feeling. But you can also numb yourself with learning.

Now, here's the problem with numbing. It temporarily will cover up how you're feeling. It will distract yourself from the emotion at hand. You'll be able to pretend that you feel different or ignore how you're feeling. But the problem with numbing is that it doesn't ever deal with the root of the problem, why you're feeling the negative emotion. Why you feel anxious, why you feel awkward, why you feel lonely, why you feel bored.

It doesn't deal with the root of these, and of course, the root is always what you are thinking. It is always the beginning of that think-feel-act cycle. That's where our emotions come from. Of course, the other problem, not only you don't get to solve what emotion you're experiencing, but another problem is the consequence from overconsumption.

When we overdrink, we get hangovers. When we overeat, we gain weight. When we overspend, we're draining our bank account. When we're overworking, we have lost time with our friends and our family and we're not going after our dreams. Numbing is a way that we unknowingly choose

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temporarily short-term relief and don't realize that we're making that choice and in return, getting a lot of long-term consequences.

So learning, how does overlearning fit in? Well, simply because you can learn, you can tell yourself, I just need to read more and listen more and research more and journal more as a means of avoiding discomfort. People are always so surprised, and you know, I was really surprised when I first had this realization that you could learn as a way to numb yourself.

Because of course, we all believe that learning is so virtuous. It's such a good thing. How could you learn too much? But it's a very simple answer. Whenever you are learning at the expense of taking action, whenever you are learning and not changing what isn't working in your life. Whenever you are learning and telling yourself, I just need a little bit more, a little bit more information, a little bit more knowledge, and then I'll do it.

The problem is it feels so good. It feels so good, it feels virtuous, it feels like such a really, really solid excuse. I got to learn a little bit more. I just need a couple more podcasts, a couple more books, a little bit more insight and then I'll do it. Then I'll do the hard thing. Then I'll move towards my discomfort.

But here's the thing; when you are learning at the expense of yourself, it's just a way to keep yourself comfortable. It just happens to feel really good doing it, and you get to do it in the safety of your own home. You don't have to do anything different. You don't have to show up differently. You just have to put in your headphones or pick up a book or open up your journal. That's it.

And this is what I want to caution you guys about because so many of you will do this when you start learning about the think-feel-act cycle. You learn this framework, you start to really see how it's working, but then you just go further and further into listening to every podcast or reading every book or oh, here's another podcast, or another book, or another teacher, or another person I can learn from.



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I was so good at doing this. I did this too. Learning at the expense of myself. Because what it boils down to is you don't need more information really. You need to take action. Changing the habit of drinking requires that you practice not drinking. It's as simple as that. You can listen to all the podcasts and read all the books and take all the notes and fill up all the journals, but if you are not practicing saying no to an urge, when saying no feels uncomfortable, you will not change the habit. Period.

Do not miss this. Do not fool yourself into believing that learning and learning and learning is okay because it feels so virtuous. Don't fool yourself by saying, well, I'm not overeating, I'm not overspending, I'm not overworking, isn't this a good thing?

And here's the thing; for those of you out there who have already taken a break from drinking so you're not right now over drinking, do not get caught in this either. Oh, well I'm not doing the overdrinking anymore so I'm fine. If you are learning at the expense of taking action, there's a problem because it means that you are using knowledge as a way, the acquisition of knowledge as a way to avoid discomfort.

I'll tell you how I can spot this. When someone wants to tell me all about the interesting things they are listening to, or all the interesting things they are reading about rather than all the interesting things they are discovering when they show up differently, when they come home from work and they don't crack open the bottle of wine.

When they hang out with friends and they don't have the drink. When they go out to dinner with their husband and they don't do the wine pairing. When they go on vacation and they don't drink. That is where the real interesting meaty stuff comes up. That's where the real discoveries take place, when the rubber hits the road.

I did this for so long. I stayed stuck in learning because learning was easy and learning was safe. And I remember there was a point in my life when my email inbox was just filled with emails from coaches and self-help

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experts and I had so many books and tons of journals and I was filling up reams and reams of paper, but I wasn't taking action.

You really have to ask yourself this. Are you learning right now at the expense of yourself? Are you getting that dopamine hit from gaining insight and understanding but not translating that insight and understanding into action? Ask yourself where you're hiding. Ask yourself where you're avoiding discomfort.

If I told you, alright, commit today to taking action, commit right now to saying no to a drink tonight, not drinking at the happy hour or at the party or this weekend or whatever event is coming up, what excuse would your brain make? Why would you tell yourself you weren't yet ready? What knowledge, what information are you waiting for?

Once you learn the think-feel-act cycle, your actions are no longer mysterious. There's always a thought, there's always a feeling that you can find. You are not powerless. There's nothing wrong with you. But you know what, there's also nothing more you need to learn.

Now the real work is what you need to do, how you need to show up differently. I talk about this a lot. You can watch a million YouTube videos about how to ride a bike, and you can read a year's worth of books on the art of cycling, but you will not actually teach your brain how to move a bike in this world until you get your butt on the seat. That is how you wire your brain to know how to do something new, how to show up differently.

And that's what I want for you. I love you guys and I love that you love the podcast, but I don't want you to just be absorbing information. I want you to be doing the work of rewiring your brain around the habit of drinking. Create new habits that can overwrite the old ones that aren't serving you. And you know how you do that? You take action. You show up differently. you make the commitment when it feels so uncomfortable, but you do it anyway.

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When this episode is over today, I want you to commit to one place right now where you will take action with regards to your drinking. It will feel uncomfortable. You will tell yourself you are not ready. That's okay. You don't have to listen to the brain. But I want you to stop sitting on the sidelines, stop avoiding discomfort, stop hiding in the virtue of learning and start doing. Create the change that you want. You can do this. I know you've got this.

Alright everybody, that's it for this week. I would love to hear from you to start doing these listener Q&As, so all you have to do if you have a question, you can send it to [podcast@rachelhart.com](mailto:podcast@rachelhart.com). Otherwise, 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](http://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

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