

Ep #112: Catastrophizing



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Rachel Hart

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

Ep #112: Catastrophizing

You are listening to the *Take A Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, episode 112.

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. We're talking about catastrophizing. Doesn't that sound amazing? Listen, it is actually a really, really important topic and something that I work on with my clients all the time, and I had to do a ton of work on this myself. Because if you have gotten in the habit of going to a drink, turning to a drink at the end of the day to take the edge off, you have to start looking, you have to start noticing what you are taking the edge off of.

And for a lot of you, it is the negative emotion that you are kind of feeling low-level all day long. The low-level annoyance or anxiety or worry and so much of that has to do with catastrophizing. So listen, it may not sound like a very fun topic, but I promise if you start to make headway on this, it can be life changing. It really can transform everything in your life, including the habit of drinking.

So here's the thing; catastrophizing is all about your brain going to worst case scenario over and over and over again. When we catastrophize all day long, we are left feeling this low-level anxiety and I say low-level because for so many people that I work with, they don't even know that they're feeling anxious all day long until we start really taking a close look, and that's how it was for me.

I would not have identified myself as feeling a lot of anxiety all day long because anxiety was just my normal state. So I didn't really even understand for a long time that it was there and how present it was in my life.

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

Ep #112: Catastrophizing

If you don't start intervening with catastrophizing and your brain's habit of doing this and the pattern of how your brain thinks and how it looks at the world when it catastrophizes, it really won't matter - and I hate to say this, but it won't matter if you say no to a drink at the end of the day. If you are catastrophizing, if you are having this low-level anxiety, even if you say no to a drink, you are going to hunt for something else. You're going to try to find something to give you relief.

And that's why this work is so powerful because you start to see that it's so much bigger than just drinking. So much bigger than your decision to say yes or no to that glass of wine. We really want to get you to a place in your life where it's not about did I drink it or did I not drink it. It's what was my reason and do I like it and do I like the results that I'm getting. Otherwise, you will definitely just switch over to other numbing activities.

So today, we're going to talk all about what catastrophizing is, why the brain does it, how it connects to the habit of drinking, and how to start changing the pattern. So first, what is catastrophizing? There's a big old hint in the name. Catastrophe. It's just imagining all the possible future negative scenarios that could happen. Notice that I said could happen, not that they did happen, but that they could happen.

Now, this is just a pattern of thinking. It actually becomes a habit of thought. So your brain starts to get very, very good at concocting all these possible future negative scenarios. The problem is the better that the brain gets at doing this, the more readily it starts to do it, and the more you start to do it without even realizing that you're catastrophizing in the first place.

Now, you hear me talk about the think-feel-act cycle all the time, that your thoughts create your feelings and your feelings drive your actions. If you are catastrophizing a lot, in fact, a lot of you are doing it all day long, I certainly was with everything, what does that mean? All the possible future imagined scenarios of everything that could happen, they're all just negative thoughts.

Ep #112: Catastrophizing

Those negative thoughts lead to negative feelings like anxiety, which lead to negative actions. This is why if you want to change the habit of drinking, you have to really understand what is motivating that action of saying yes to a drink. If you focus all your attention on just did I say yes or did I say no, you're missing the picture.

When we catastrophize, nothing has actually happened yet. Nothing bad has occurred. It's just everything bad that you have imagined. So what that means is you're creating a lot of negative thoughts in the think-feel-act cycle, which creates a lot of negative emotion, which then you need relief from. But guess what? All of this, all of these cycles, all the thoughts, all the feelings, all the actions, they're all unfolding when nothing has actually happened. Nothing bad has taken place.

You are suffering emotionally and then suffering the consequences because of the decisions that you're making in order to deal with that negative emotion when nothing has gone wrong. I talk about this, how the brain is often a kind of faulty crystal ball or a crystal ball that only can see the negative future. We look into the future and we see a future that is always bad.

So imagine for an example that you have a presentation at work. Are you imagining how amazing it's going to go and how much the presentation is going to make a difference and people are going to like it? Or are you imagining how it's going to be a hot mess and how everything's going to go wrong and you're going to be embarrassed and you're not going to do a good job?

Where does your brain naturally go? Probably naturally goes to how that presentation isn't going to go so well and we do this with everything. Think about the last time you were expecting someone to show up at a certain time. Maybe they said that they would be home at 5:30, and then six o'clock rolled around, no sign of the person you were waiting for. Where did your brain go?

Ep #112: Catastrophizing

I'll tell you where my brain used to go. It was all death and destruction and doom and gloom. I was never thinking, "I don't know, maybe he stayed late at work because he was having an interesting conversation with someone or got engrossed in a project or wanted to stop by the grocery store and pick up ingredients for dinner." Nope. I was going right to doom and gloom and death and destruction.

And I remember actually very vividly before I learned how to manage my mind, before I learned how to intervene with catastrophizing, I could get myself so worked up, and I mean really to the point of tears. I would have a boyfriend who was supposed to show up and he was late and suddenly my brain was just off to the races and I was imagining getting the call from the police and going to the hospital and going to the funeral and being alone.

I mean, it was amazing to watch my brain spin out. Listen, it didn't feel amazing at the time, but it really is kind of amazing in retrospect to see what a terrible universe I concocted in such a short period of time. And sometimes, you know what, sometimes the person didn't even need to be late. Sometimes I would just find my brain worrying and catastrophizing that something could happen.

It's just amazing, right? That brain is like, here's my terrible crystal ball, look into it, you will only see the worst things in the world. So that's what catastrophizing is. It's imagining all the possible future negative scenarios that could happen when nothing's actually happened. So it creates a lot of negative emotions and a lot of negative actions for you.

And the question is why does the brain do this? Why is your brain acting like a crystal ball that can only see the worst possible future? You know what I'm going to tell you if you listen to this podcast. That's how it was designed. The brain evolved to spot the negative, spotting danger, anticipating the worst. It helped humans stay safe at a time, thousands of years ago when we were living in a very dangerous environment, when survival was not a given.

It was actually a benefit to have a brain that was always kind of wondering and worrying hey, what's in that bush? It kept us safe because survival was

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

Ep #112: Catastrophizing

not a given. And so your brain really thinking that catastrophizing is just about trying to help you, it's trying to keep you safe. The problem is the brain has not caught up to our modern world.

I would offer that most of you listening are not every day wondering whether or not you are going to be able to make it through the day, whether or not you're going to be able to survive, whether or not you're going to be able to find clean water and food and shelter and or if you're going to have to run away from predators. That's not the life that you're living, but your brain, it just hasn't caught up with you. It thinks it's being helpful.

Now, some of you may say, "Okay fine, but I think maybe I catastrophize more than other people. Is it possible that I just have a more anxious mind? Is it possible that maybe I'm just wired that way? So I have more anxiety, more ability to catastrophizing than other people?"

And here's what I'm going to tell you. I don't know. Maybe. I mean, maybe they could prove, someone could show you that you just technically have a more anxious mind. You know what, I don't think it matters. What really matters is the pattern of thought that you get into. Because here's what I know to be true; you have both a lower brain and a higher brain. You have the ability to watch your brain at work.

So even if we could prove that you technically came out of the womb with a more anxious mind, you have consciousness. You have the ability to watch your brain in action and question and challenge and teach it new ways of behaving and operating, so I kind of think it's a moot point. It doesn't really matter.

What matters is what your brain is doing now. So even if you have supposedly a more anxious mind, and even if you saw a lot of catastrophizing when you were growing up, even if that was modelled to you, I don't think it really matters. Here's the thing; my family, we joke about this a lot. We are big into worst case scenario.

It's so funny because my husband is really - that is just not how his brain operates. It's not kind of the pattern, and sometimes I think you know, I

Ep #112: Catastrophizing

think that he wasn't raised with as much worst-case scenario as I was. But you know what, it doesn't really matter because regardless, once you learn how to manage your mind, you have the tools at your disposal to intervene with catastrophizing.

So just because you are primed to think that something is going to go wrong and just because you notice that this is where your brain likes to hang out all the time, it doesn't mean that you have to blame how you were brought up. It doesn't mean you have to blame your brain. It just means you have to teach your brain something new.

I'll tell you that for a long time, I actually believed that preparing for the worst was helpful. And you may think this as well. You may say yeah, it's not super fun to catastrophize and think of the worst-case scenario all the time, but deep down you might think that it's kind of helpful. Because maybe you're saying well, it keeps me on my toes, or it means that I always have a plan.

But here's what I want you to consider; when you are on guard all the time, when you are creating little bits of negative emotion and little bits of anxiety all the time, not only does it not feel good, but you have to examine whether or not you are coping with that anxiety in a way that serves you.

If you told me hey listen Rachel, I just notice my brain always catastrophizing and it just keeps me on my toes and I always have a plan and I love it, and you were getting good results, then by all means, go forward. Catastrophize as much as you want, create as much anxiety as you want. But you know what's happening for the majority of you? You're not coping with that anxiety in a healthy way.

In fact, you're often, often turning to things in your external environment to numb that anxiety and then you're getting crappy results. So really start to think if you believe deep down that you think preparing for the worst is helpful, maybe being on guard all the time, maybe creating all that anxiety for you is not giving you very great results because you have to clean up from all the overdrinking and overeating and over-worrying and all the things that you do to numb how you feel.

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

Ep #112: Catastrophizing

That, I promise, never helps you prepare for when things go wrong. When your body and brain is always on high alert, it does more than just feel bad. Long-term exposure to stress hormones can wreak havoc on your weight and your blood pressure and your digestive system and your immune system and your sleep. So not only is your emotional environment uncomfortable, but you can create an uncomfortable physical environment for yourself as well.

Again, when you have a lot of negative emotions and a lot of negative physical repercussions, my guess is you are not actually in your best shape to deal with worst case scenario if it were to happen. So I want you to really see that perhaps the belief that preparing for the worst all the time and catastrophizing is helpful is just wrong. That you just end up with a lot of low-level anxiety that maybe is so common and so prevalent throughout your day that you don't even really notice that you have all that anxiety, which is a pretty unfortunate situation to be in.

But it also suggests that what keeps you safe, what allows you to be safe and secure is a plan and your preparations. And I want you to consider this; what keeps you safe is you. It is your ability to clearly think, to strategize, to problem-solve. That's what keeps you safe when something happens.

Now listen, I have an emergency kit in my house and in my car. But there is a huge difference between thinking hey, I should have some supplies on hand and living out worst case scenario on repeat all the time, over and over again. From what's going to happen with my presentation at work to why didn't my husband show up on time, to what's going to happen with my ability to change my drinking.

Doing that all the time, such a big difference between getting some supplies on hand and mentally living in this place where you're just playing out a negative future. You know what a lot of people do in that place? They just kind of stay stuck there and don't take a lot of action.

When you're catastrophizing all the time, oh my god, I'm going to be late, oh my god, I'm going to miss the deadline, oh my god, I'm going to get fired, oh my god, I'm going to screw this up, oh my god, somebody's going

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

Ep #112: Catastrophizing

to die, you will just keep searching for relief. And that is why so many people that I work with really come to recognize that their anxiety and their brain's habit of doing worst case scenario, which maybe they thought was helpful is actually just fuel for the habit of drinking.

This is what so many of you are doing. You're not even realizing how this tendency to just fall into worst case scenario is fuelling the habit of drinking. This is what I want to show you guys. Imagine when you're doing this all day long. Imagine when this is your go-to response. You are creating all these negative thoughts, all these negative emotions, which then your brain wants relief from at the end of the day.

So it's no wonder that you come home and think god, I really want to take the edge off. Of course, you do because that's where your brain has been hanging out. This is why I always say if you are going to sustainably change the habit, what you have to do is actually learn how to turn down the volume on your negative emotions that you experience all day long.

Because then it is easier to say no to a drink because you're not having so much negative emotion that your brain is telling you you need relief from. You're not so desperate for that drink at the end of the day and feeling like god, if I don't get that, then what? If you can turn down the volume on negative emotions, it will be so much easier for you to change the habit, but guess what. In order to do that, you have to notice when your brain is catastrophizing and you have to intervene with it.

So how do you do it? There are a couple things that you can do. First, just remind your brain why it is catastrophizing. So when you notice yourself going to worst case scenario, just remind your brain oh right, of course you're doing this, you were designed to do this. You think you're keeping me safe, you think I live in a very dangerous world. You think negative emotions are a problem to be solved, a problem to be avoided.

Remind yourself that this is how your brain was designed in many ways and it is now just really going to town with spotting the negative. Now, the reason why I think this is important is because I watch so many people notice themselves catastrophizing once they learn about it and then want to

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

Ep #112: Catastrophizing

beat themselves up. That will not work. Creating more negative emotion, more guilt, more shame will not work. Just create awareness.

So remind your brain why it's doing it. Oh, you think I'm in danger. I'm not in danger, I'm safe, it will be okay. Two, you can intervene with catastrophizing by asking yourself what is my brain really afraid of? I want you to really think about this.

When you're really nervous about that work presentation or when you're really nervous about the first date or whatever it is, when you're imagining all those terrible scenarios, what is your brain really afraid of? Is it that you're going to die? Probably not. Or is it afraid of how it believes, how it anticipates you will feel if things go poorly?

Now remember, how you feel is always connected to what you are thinking, not what is happening, and this is very good news because it means whatever unfolds in the future, even if your worst case scenario comes true, you are not destined to feel a negative emotion because you can choose how to think and how you want to respond about what is happening.

We have to pay attention. Are you actually avoiding or fearing a negative emotion, and then why? Why is it something that you are feeling afraid of and wanting to avoid? Most people just stop with the answer, "I don't know, negative emotions are terrible." But this is where I always come back and challenge you. Is that really the case? If they're so terrible, tell me why.

Remember, negative emotions are simply something that you experience in your body, just like positive emotions. So if they're so terrible, if they're so unbearable, tell me what's happening. What is actually unfolding in your body? When people start to get very specific at this level, when they start to talk about their breathing and their temperature and their heart rate and their digestion and muscle tension, they start to really notice yeah, some of these things may not be the most comfortable, but it doesn't really match up with that story that you've told yourself about how it's unbearable or it's terrible or you hate it or it must immediately go away.

Ep #112: Catastrophizing

Sometimes you're able to see like, yeah, it's a little jaw tension and I feel kind of warm and my palms are sweating and my heart is beating. But suddenly when you get to that level of physical sensation, you really see it's not the end of the world.

Now, the third thing you can do to intervene with catastrophizing is just let your brain go there. Now, you have to let it go there in a kind of different way than what you're been doing, but you have to start asking yourself, okay, if you're catastrophizing like the presentation isn't going to go well and I'm going to get fired, let your brain go there.

Then what? You get fired. So what? What happens next? Or even if you're catastrophizing about someone that you love and catastrophizing that they're going to die, okay, let your brain go there. Then what? What happens next? Get concrete. Your brain wants to stop just at what it believes is the worst thing, the worst situation it can come up with.

Don't let it stop there. Let your brain keep going. Get really concrete. What would really happen? Is it truly a disaster? Is your life truly online or would you figure things out? Because here's what happens; so many of us just stop at the place, oh my god, what if I lose my job? Or they stop at the place of oh my god, what if there's a plane crash?

But really, you have to start to get concrete. Is that what you're really fearing? Is it your death? Is it someone else's death? Can you create evidence that actually when things have happened in your life, when you lost a job or someone got sick or you got sick or you got into an accident, or you got out of a relationship, whatever it was, the terrible thing, do you actually have evidence that you survived?

You have to start being on the lookout for evidence that you can handle difficult things. Everything that your brain is telling you is too terrible, too hard, too unbearable, you have to start collecting evidence that actually, you've gone through some challenging situations in your life and you've come out on the other side.

Ep #112: Catastrophizing

Listen, catastrophizing is something that your brain thinks is helpful. If you are stuck right now in the habit of overdrinking, I will guarantee that it is not helpful. And you know what? Even if you're not, still not helpful. You have got to understand why the brain loves to catastrophizing, how the brain thinks it is helping you, understand that it's not, and then really start to see that you can intervene with it.

These are three things that you can do. Remind the brain why it is catastrophizing in the first place, ask the brain what it's really afraid of, and then start getting really concrete. Don't just stop at what you believe is the terrible situation. What would happen? Do you have evidence that you have been able to come through on the other side of challenging situations before?

If you don't do this work, it is tremendously difficult to change the habit of drinking and it is why so many people will say okay well I didn't drink for a week and I crossed all those days off the calendar but then I just wanted to go straight back to it. I just needed my relief. Because of course, you're not actually changing what is fuelling the habit. You're not changing the root cause, which is how you are feeling during the day.

So be on the lookout for this. Really notice if your brain is going there and just name it. Start to intervene with it. That alone can make a tremendous difference. Alright everybody, 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.

Ep #112: Catastrophizing

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.