

Ep #269: How to Stop Backsliding



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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 269.

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.

All right, welcome back everyone. We are talking about something called backsliding today. And you know what I mean, when you start making progress, you're making progress with your drinking. Maybe you're keeping your commitment to say no, or you're keeping your commitment not to go overboard. You are feeling good. And then all of a sudden, one day, it's like, "What happened? What did I do last night? Why did I make this decision?"

And slowly, but surely, you notice that you start backsliding. It feels like all the progress that you made has been lost. And I will tell you, having been in this position for so many, so many years, it can be incredibly frustrating to see yourself making the progress that you want, and then feeling almost like you're in a state of self-sabotage. That it's almost like you can't let yourself be successful.

And in order to stop this seesaw that is not very fun, in order to stop it, you really have to start practicing three things that have nothing to do with being more disciplined, nothing to do with being good. It really has to do with building a skill set. And so that's what I want to talk to you about today.

And the reason why this came up is because at the beginning of all of the coaching calls inside Take A Break, so we have a couple of different calls a week where people can participate. We talk about skills, we do workshops,

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and we also do live coaching. But no matter what type of call it is, we always start with people sharing their celebration.

So if you're familiar with Zoom, which I know most people are now because of the pandemic, we just have people type in their celebrations in the Q&A box. And I love seeing people's celebrations, also because the celebrations are not necessarily what you think they might be. We're so used to celebrating when we are doing everything right, and when we're getting straight A's, and when we're being perfect.

But one of the things that I stress so much over and over again, is that you have to learn how to celebrate yourself. You have to learn how to find what is working, even when your brain wants to tell you, "No, you're doing everything wrong." Even when your brain wants you to believe that you're not showing up the way that you should be.

This is a big thing that we work on as soon as people join Take A Break. You really have to let go of this mindset of I need to be perfect in order to change. What you need is continual progress, to keep showing up for yourself.

And that only happens when you challenge yourself to say, "Okay, what's working? Maybe I drank last night, but I showed up to today's coaching call. Maybe I have noticed that I'm resisting or distracting myself from my urges, but I'm posting in the Ask A Coach area and trying to get help on this." You really have to challenge your brain.

And so people were posting in celebrations, and one thing that I love seeing is when people will post things like, I'm no longer afraid of backsliding, or I no longer give up if I slip up. Even when I feel like I'm stumbling, I'm still showing up for myself and I'm actually learning from when I don't keep my commitment instead of immediately going into

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beating myself up. That, to me, more than anything is such a profound transformation.

And so I want to talk about how you can start creating that for yourself. Because the backsliding, when you feel like you're kind of going back and forth with your drinking, you're being good and then you're being bad. And you're following the rules and then you're breaking them. It really is fueled by a binge and restrict cycle.

And what I mean by that is that you're very focused on this kind of rule based mindset, this idea that if you become a good rule follower, that's how you're going to change the habit. That is not how habits change. Habits do not change by learning how to follow rules. They change when you learn what's actually behind, what's actually driving the decision to drink. And then understanding how to shift that. Rather than telling yourself you just have to be good and say no.

But that binge and restrict cycle can be so frustrating because when people start the backslide, when they wake up and think like, "Oh, God, why did I do that last night? Why did I drink so much?" There is a tendency then to allow that to kind of morph into a shame spiral.

And when you do that, more often than not, what people start doing is just giving themselves permission to say, "Well, I was bad last night, so I might as well be bad for the rest of the weekend." Or I might as well be bad for the rest of the week, or I'll clean up my act come next month.

And that binge and restrict cycle really can set you back, it really can feel like this never ending seesaw. Change needs to happen from the inside out. That's how you stop backsliding. That's how you stop this kind of being good and then being bad mentality when it comes to drinking.

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So there are really three skills that you have to bring to bear if you want to create this kind of change inside of yourself. They're very simple, we're going to talk about them today. And I'm going to talk about how you can start practicing them.

Okay, so skill number one is changing your response to your urges. The desire that you have, the cravings that you have for a drink, you have to learn how to actually change the response. And when I'm talking about changing the response, what I mean is instead of going to this place of gritting your teeth and resisting, trying to fight, or be at war with the urge.

Or going to a place of distraction, like let me just keep myself busy and occupied. It's really going to the place of the urge is not a problem. The urge is harmless, it can't make me do anything. One of the analogies that we use a lot inside Take A Break is the idea that the urge is a false alarm.

So your lower brain, that part of you that cares about survival, it cares about keeping you alive. And part of the way that it does that is by focusing on finding pleasure, avoiding pain, and doing both of those things as easily and efficiently as possible.

And that lower brain of yours, it loves rewards. It loves rewards, they were something that the lower brain used and learned, "Oh, rewards help me survive. They helped me live." Now, of course, humans then came along and figured out how to create much more intense, much more concentrated rewards like the difference between the reward you get from grapes versus the reward that you get from wine.

So humans manipulated rewards to make them stronger and more powerful. Now, even so, even when they become stronger and more powerful, they're still harmless. They still can't make you do anything. And so the analogy that we like to talk about a lot is the idea of the false alarm.

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And so that urge is a false alarm. It's your lower brain saying, "Oh, you need it. This is really important. This is important for my survival." Of course, you know you don't ever need a drink. You can really want a drink, you can have a lot of desire for a drink, but you never actually need it.

And so just the idea of putting a different label on that urge. Instead of saying, "I got to resist it, I got to fight it, I got to push it away, I got to distract myself," acknowledging it's a false alarm. It's my lower brain telling me that this drink is really important, when I can acknowledge that it isn't.

Really shifting how you respond to urges, often is less about what you're doing in the moment and more about how you're thinking about the urge. So we spend a lot of time separating what's happening in my mind, what is the story that I have about the urge? I hate how it feels. It's terrible. It's too much. It never goes away. It's going to last all night. I wish it wasn't here.

What's that story versus what's actually happening in my body? What is the physical sensation of desiring something and then saying no to it? What is that really like? Most people have next to no experience with describing that until they start doing this work. But what most people discover is that, yeah, maybe they feel a little restless at first, maybe they feel a little fidgety.

But the experience of the urge in their body and the story about the urge in their mind, two totally different things. And so, so often really understanding that you have to respond to urges differently is less about what you're doing and more about just being able to distinguish between the story and the sensation.

And that's when people, when they start doing this, people will say, "I can't believe how quickly it passes. I can't believe how, without really doing anything, it just subsides on its own."

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When you give up the resistance, when you let go of the belief that you need to distract yourself, when you really identify your story about the urge and see, you know what, that's just all made up. It's not a big deal. It's harmless, it can't make me do anything. It's a false alarm.

When you start to do that people will say it over and over again. And my experience as well, it's like it comes and it goes. It just kind of flows over you. And being able to actually watch that process happen rather than just kind of intellectually hear me talk about it is so transformative.

And so that's the first thing that you really need to do. Because when people are backsliding on their progress, it's because they're having urges or having their desire appear. And instead of having this story, this new kind of story that it's not a big deal. They're in the old story that they just don't want to deal with it. And they just want what they want when they want it. And they want to be able to say yes.

And so learning how to respond differently to the urges is how you prevent backsliding. So that's the first skill.

The second skill is all about responding to stress and overwhelm. Now, when people complete the 30 day challenge, they continue to do their work and they continue doing the work on advanced classes that we teach. Because one of the biggest problems, I think, is that we approach the habit of drinking as if it's all about alcohol.

It's not all about alcohol. It's about understanding how your body responds to rewards. It's about understanding your thoughts that you have about pleasure. It's about being connected with your body. It's about the kind of story that you have about relationships. It's about your experience of time, and your experience of stress.

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And stress and overwhelm, and learning how to show up differently with stress and overwhelm is one of the most important things when it comes to really getting off this seesaw of bingeing and restricting. Because what people will say over and over again, is they'll say, "I was so good, I was so good. And then things just got crazy at work." Or then I just had this crazy family emergency, or then everything blew up in the world.

So often the thing that people will point to as the reason why they started down that hill of backsliding, is because of some sort of stress that they were experiencing. And so it's, again, not enough to just tell yourself, "I just need to practice being good. And I need to practice being disciplined." You have to actually practice how are you going to learn and cope with stress and overwhelm differently?

Because most people, when they have a habit connected to drinking, they have taught themselves that the solution to stress, the solution to overwhelm is to pour a drink. Pour a drink, you'll feel better. And so it's really important then, to learn and to teach your brain new ways to deal with that stress and to deal with the overwhelm.

And now the beautiful thing here, and this is why the way that we structure it inside Take A Break is so powerful, it's because all of those skills that you're learning in your first 30 days. The skills are really relating to your urges differently. That is the foundation for learning how to relate to your emotions differently. Learning how to relate to your stress and your overwhelm differently.

This is the thing so often that people will discover, is that they don't have to learn 25 new skills. It really is a handful of skills. It really is three or four skills that you're just continually building on. And so when you actually discover that you can allow urges, and you can start to separate the story of the urge from what's happening in your body, you see where your authority is, you see how much power you have.

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Well, the same is true when it comes to stress and overwhelm. So often the reason why stress and overwhelm is the trigger for people to go back to the habit and to resume drinking in a way that they don't like, is because they tell themselves not only that pouring a drink is how they're going to feel better. But they tell themselves, it's just too much. I can't handle this. I can't deal with this.

I can't even tell you how much in my life that was my story around stress and overwhelm. It was too much. It was too all encompassing. It would never go away. And so I was constantly searching for things to just feel better for a little bit.

But now, here's the problem when you take that approach. When you're trying to find the thing, whether it is alcohol, or food, or cigarettes, whatever it is, when you're trying to find the thing to help you feel better temporarily. You may temporarily numb or mask how you feel, but you're not actually getting to the root cause of the stress and overwhelm.

You're not actually figuring out how to deal with it on the long term, you just have these kinds of short term solutions that have these negative consequences as well. And so one of the things that is so important to do is to understand your story of stress, your story of overwhelm. How are your thoughts making your emotional experience that much more difficult?

Now, this really can take some practice because I think when most people start working on this, they want to go into this place of blaming themselves. They want to go into this place of, "Oh, okay, so now I'm just making my situation worse." But so often, it really is about just small shifts in your language.

One of the things that I have seen come up time and time again, is people will say, "I just can't handle what's happening right now. I just can't handle it." This is a very common thought that a lot of people will have. And one of

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the things that can be so powerful, so often when we're telling ourselves that we can't handle something, we're actually handling it. Like we're actually in the process of doing the things that we need to do to cope, doing the things that we need to do to figure the situation out. Yet we're telling ourselves the whole time that we can't handle it.

I remember watching this in particular, in my own family. So when my grandparents had to go into a retirement home, it was a lot. It was a lot of stress on the family. It was selling their house. It was helping my grandparents kind of understand that this was going to be something that was good for them. They didn't particularly want to do it.

And I remember listening to my parents and hearing them so often talk about how it was so overwhelming, and it was too much to do, and they couldn't really handle it. While at the same time they were handling it. They were helping get the house on the market. They were helping kind of have these conversations with my grandparents and look at the different retirement homes.

And so think about whatever that situation is in your life where you are actually taking the steps, you are actually doing the things to resolve whatever problem you're facing. But your story about it is that it's too much for you, it's too big for you, it's too overwhelming.

Again, much like how we look at the story of our urges, we can look at the story of our stress and overwhelm. And that is what is so amazing to really see, just by changing the story we can start to alleviate some of our suffering. I think that's something that most people, before they start doing this work, don't even realize this possible.

We're so used to, well, I just feel totally stressed out and so I need a drink, or I need to eat something, or I need something that's going to take my mind off of it. And not even realize that you can actually turn down the

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volume on your stress and overwhelm and it has nothing to do with finding anything external in your environment to make you feel better. You can simply feel better by changing the story.

But that response to stress, how you respond to it is so important because that is what I see time and time again as the reason that people use. They say I was doing really well until this really stressful thing or overwhelming thing happened. And so learning how to change that response is going to set you up for success.

And then the third thing to do in order to stop this backsliding and to get off the seesaw is really change your response to failure. Because when I talk about the binge and restrict cycle, I think one of the things that is important to understand is the binge doesn't necessarily mean how much you're consuming. Sometimes it's about kind of how long the period of over consumption goes on for.

And so this is what I remember happening quite a bit in my own life, is that I would be making a lot of progress with my drinking, or I'd be making a lot of progress with my eating. And then I would have one bad night where I just went totally overboard. And instead of turning around the next day and getting back on track, I made that one night means so much negative.

Negative about me, negative about my ability to change, negative about my future. And I got so stuck in the story of why were you so stupid? Why do you keep sabotaging yourself? Why can't you figure this out? When are you going to learn your lesson? When are you going to be able to just do what you know is good for you?

I was so stuck in that story. And that story didn't evaporate after 20 minutes, I was stuck in it for days, and weeks, and months sometimes. And that's really what would happen, it would feel like I was in these periods of

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making a lot of progress and trying to change my relationship with alcohol. And then it was like I had, you know, six months where I just went dark.

Where I just like shut down any kind of curiosity, or awareness, or attempts at change because I was so deep in the story of you were just stupid and you're never going to learn your lesson, and you're never going to be able to figure this out. And so so much of the binge, again, is not about how much you're consuming, it's over the length of time. The period of time where you keep using the previous day as evidence that you can't change.

And so your ability to respond to failure in a new way is one of the most powerful things that you can do in order to get off the seesaw. And that's what I love about the celebrations that I talked about at the beginning of the episode. When people say, I'm no longer afraid of backsliding on my progress. I no longer give up if I slip up. Even when I feel like I'm stumbling, I keep showing up. I'm actually learning from when I don't keep my commitment instead of beating myself up.

Imagine if that was true for you. Imagine if your response to not keeping your commitment was learning. It wasn't going into like, who cares, I'm never going to figure this out. And also it wasn't going into these kind of crazy, super restrictive rules for yourself. But it was actually this idea I can learn from what's happening. I can keep showing up. This isn't a moment for me to give up and to throw in the towel.

This is a moment for me to see, oh, there's something about the habit that I wasn't able to see before. There was something about the habit, and something about the thing think, feel, act cycle connected to my drinking that I didn't have awareness of.

So really changing your relationship with failure is how you stop backsliding. Because when you have a relationship with failure that doesn't mean that there's anything wrong with you, or that you're incapable of

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change, then failure can turn into a steppingstone instead of this obstacle that's holding you back.

And so those really are the three things, right? In order to stop backsliding, it has nothing to do with having more discipline, or being a better rule follower. It has to do with these skills. The skills of learning to change how you understand and respond to your urges.

Learning how to identify the story that you have about your stress and overwhelm. The types of things that you'd normally use as an excuse to say, well, I've had a shitty day, or a shitty week, or a shitty month, so I might as well drink.

And then learning how to change to those moments when you break your commitment. Those moments where you slip up, or you give in. And seeing that as a steppingstone instead of a sign that you've done something wrong or a sign that you're never going to figure this out.

Those three skills are how you stop backsliding forever. So think about that the next time you feel like you're on a seesaw. Or the next time you want to slip into that place of, "Oh, God, not again. Why did I do this? Why did I drink too much?" Think about okay, what do I need right now? Is it changing how I respond to urges? Is it changing how I'm responding to stress? Or is it changing how I respond to failure?

Just figuring out which one of those to work on really will make such a tremendous difference. All right, that's it for today. I will see you next week.

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

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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.

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