

Ep #272: What Your Brain Learns When You Reach for a 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 272.

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, hello, hello, everyone. We are talking about how to create change for good, change that lasts when it comes to your drinking, and really when it comes to anything and everything in life. I think this is so important because if you are like me, you have been in the place where you feel like you can change for a little while, but it doesn't really stick.

So, it feels like you're constantly in this back and forth or that you're responsible for a bit. Then you go overboard, and that place creates so much worry and so much kind of chatter in your mind of just wondering, God, am I ever going to figure this out? Am I ever actually going to create a lasting change in my relationship with alcohol?

Now, the problem is that so many people are on this seesaw. So many people are on the, well, I'm being really good, and then, I was really bad or that I was being responsible, and you know what, I wanted to rebel and have fun. Or I was so committed when I woke up in the morning and then, ugh, you know, 4:00 rolled around, and my day was crappy, so I gave in. And what happens when you're on this seesaw is you will start to see the seesaw as the problem.

You'll start to see the back and forth as something that is a sign there is something wrong with you, but there is nothing wrong with you. Really,

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what I want you to understand is that all of this back and forth is a symptom of the underlying structure of your drinking habits that you just yet haven't figured out how to address. And until you learn how to address this, you'll stay on the seesaw. That's what we talk about here. That's what this podcast is all about. It's not just looking at, okay, so how do I figure out to saying no?

It's about understanding why do I want to say yes. Part of understanding that is really knowing and acknowledging that every time you reach for a drink, your brain is learning something. I really want you to consider that. Every time you saddle up to the bar, every time you put wine in your shopping cart, every time you pop open a beer while you're watching a game. It isn't just, oh that tastes good, or this will be fun. It's about your brain learning something, and this is the part that most people are missing when they try to change the habit.

They focus all of their energy on like, okay, I have to be good, I have to say no, I have to be more responsible, but they never actually end up addressing what their brain has been learning this entire time by drinking because they don't address that, that's when you end up on the seesaw. That's why you end up in this back and forth position of being good for a little bit, being responsible for a little bit, and then it all just starts to crumble.

So, I want you to think about it this way when you drink at a party, your brain is learning something. Maybe it's learning about how you celebrate, how you have fun, how you let go of your inhibitions. Think about when your brain learns that what happens if you say no at a party, right? A lot of people are like, okay, well, why am I going to go to the party? I mean, that's how I used to be.

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It's like, I'm just going to sit there, be awkward, be bored, and everyone else is going to have a grand old time around me, no thank you. I'll skip that. So, your brain is always learning it. It's learning when you come home after a day where work was a total shit show, and you walk into your kitchen, and you pour yourself a glass of wine. You're teaching your brain something. You're teaching your brain; hey, this is how I feel better.

This is how I stop thinking about my day, or I stop looking at my work email. This is how I forget about everything that really bothered me today. Or when your best friend says, oh, don't make me drink alone, and so what do you do? You give in. I've done that many, many times. Your brain is learning something in that moment. It's learning not only hey, this is how we create connection by sharing a drink, but also this is how I keep people happy.

The choices that I make around alcohol influence whether or not someone else feels disappointed. When you reward yourself with a drink after maybe making dinner when it was the last thing you wanted to do or helping out with homework or dealing with bedtime meltdowns. When your reward for kind of getting through the final hours of your day is, hey, let's pour a glass of wine, your brain starts to learn, oh, this is a signal that I'm off the clock. This is the signal that the day is done, parent duty is over, and I can finally just have some me-time.

The list goes on and on, but whenever you're reaching for a drink, you have to consider that your brain is also learning a lesson. And what happens and what I did for a very long time is I wanted to change my drinking. I wanted to change the habit, but the only way that I knew how to do that was just by following the rules, just by telling myself, okay, Rachel, you're not allowed to drink tonight, or you're only allowed to have one, or you're only allowed to have two, or you have to be good.

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I was so fixated on believing that learning how to follow the rules would be the solution here. So, all of my energy was focused on the number, whether that number was zero or one or two, or maybe I didn't really specify a number. Still, I was just like, okay, just be good, don't go crazy. Now, meanwhile, when all that energy is focused on a number, when you say no in that moment, the underlying lesson that your brain learned in the past about the benefits of drinking it's still there. Right?

That didn't just magically go away, and suddenly you're like, ugh, this is kind of hard. This kind of sucks because it's supposed to be a celebration, or I'm supposed to be off the clock, or I don't want to disappoint people. Your brain learned to solve these problems by reaching for a drink. When you're focused on just trying to follow the rules, you're not providing an alternative solution in those moments.

You're just saying, be good, be disciplined, be a rule follower, and that's why change doesn't last. That's the real reason why you're in this back and forth, why it feels like you're on a seesaw because you're not teaching your brain anything new. You're just focusing all of your energy on an amount or all your energy on saying no. You're not finding new ways to solve the problem that drinking was solving for you in the moment.

Now, when I phrase it that way, a lot of people will say, no, no, no. I don't like it. I don't like thinking that me drinking was about me solving any kind of problem. There is all this kind of stigma behind it. Still, when you start to get really curious about what is happening in your brain and the lessons that your brain is learning when you reach for a drink, you start to see, yeah, it kind of is about solving a problem.

It's about solving the problem about how you feel, a very human thing, right? We're always trying to solve that problem. It's not unique to people

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who come home after a stressful day and reach for a drink. So much of humanity is structured around how do I feel better? But what that means is that when you're trying to change the habit, you have to take this piece of the puzzle into account.

You cannot just focus on just say no or be good or be disciplined or grit your teeth or have a lot of willpower. It's not going to work. You're going to stay in this back and forth, you're going to make progress, and then you're going to backslide, and then you're going to beat yourself up, and trust me, it is not a lot of fun. Change cannot just be about saying no. It has to be about getting curious about how the habit is working for you.

Listen, I've given you a lot of examples here, but there are so many more. The habit will operate differently for different people. Some of you will find that it's very connected to being social; some of you will say no, it has nothing to do with that. It has to do with spending time on my own. Some of you will find that it's very connected to celebrations and other people will say no, no, it's just like my way, you know, to unwind after a long day.

You just have to be curious. You have to be curious instead of telling yourself it's just because I like to drink. It's just because it tastes good. You have to be curious about hey, what is my brain learning in this moment? What am I teaching my brain when I reach for this drink? And listen, when I say that, I'm not about judging it. I'm not about saying that you're doing something wrong. I'm just asking you to really understand your behaviors around alcohol from a place that's deeper than I like the way it tastes.

In order to do this, there really are a couple of steps that you have to follow. So, in the first one, you just notice your desire. You notice that urge or that craving of like, oh, a drink would be good right now, that sounds good, and then you just ask yourself, okay, how am I feeling? Before that moment,

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before that desire crept in, before I had that little bit of like, anticipation or excitement that seemed good, how was I feeling? What is that emotion?

Notice I'm not even asking you to do anything differently. I'm not even asking you to say no. I'm just asking you to get a little curious about what emotion, what feeling, proceeded noticing your desire. That always is how we start out because most of us go through life very, very unconscious of how we're feeling, and so it seems like our desire just comes out of the blue, but it never does.

There's always an underlying emotion there. Your job is to get better and better at noticing what that emotion is because that emotion will give you a clue when it comes to step two. Step two is about really, okay, so I felt this urge. I had this craving. I notice the desire, and now I'm asking myself, okay, so, what lesson would my brain learn if I said yes right now? I want you to think about that and see if you can answer it also in a nonjudgmental way.

We're not going to the place of, oh, my brain would learn that I am no good at following commitments, or my brain would learn that I just am a compulsive person, or I can't be trusted. I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about in that moment. Let's say you're at your desk, right? You're working at home. It's the end of the day, and you notice that urge. What lesson would your brain learn if you acted on that craving? That the day was done? That you could get a little relief from this project that you were finding really frustrating?

What about when you're out at a restaurant with people, and you notice everybody is drinking, and maybe you're not, and you have that desire? What lesson would your brain learn in that moment? Would it learn? Oh, this is an antidote to feeling awkward or to feeling like I'm missing out or to

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make myself feel more connected instead of staring at what's in everyone else's glass; just get curious. What would that lesson be? What would I be teaching my brain in that moment, not from a place of judgment that you're doing something wrong, but a place of really trying to understand the habit?

Then, the last step is to ask yourself, okay instead of focusing on just like say no, just be good, just keep your commitment, which is what a lot of people want to do when their desire appears, or their craving appears. It's like a lot of people think that it's time to buckle down, right? What I want you to think about is, what else could I be focusing on in this moment? Instead of just putting all of my energy into saying no, what else could I focus on that would help my brain learn a new way to solve this problem?

Maybe it's learning how to set a boundary with work and not answering emails once you've left the office. Maybe it's learning how to feel connected to the people that you're with and seeing what you have in common and everything that you share rather than everything that is different about you rather than relying on a buzz to make it easier. Maybe it's about learning how to stop your brain from focusing and chattering about everything that you need to get done tomorrow or everything that you didn't get done today and learning just how to be present in the moment where you are right now.

It's really about thinking how can I start teaching myself new skills, which by the way, is totally possible. I don't care how old you are. I don't care how long you have been drinking. You have a human brain, which means you have one of the greatest tools at your disposal. At your disposal, you have a brain that can always learn new things, but most of us don't realize that. Most of us spend our lives thinking, well, this is just who I am. I'm just someone who overdoes it. I'm just someone who thinks more is better. I'm just someone who can't be trusted. I'm just someone that doesn't follow through on my commitments to myself.

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Not realizing that the only reason that's happening is because no one shows us. No one teaches us how to look underneath the hood and really understand how that habit is working. Instead, we're like, I don't know. I try to say no, and sometimes it works, and sometimes it doesn't, and I can't figure out why. It's only because you're not looking deep enough. You're just kind of at your surface level.

This is the work of changing the habit for good. This is the work for creating lasting change. It's not about being a rule follower. It's not about being more disciplined. It's really about changing your perspective about how the habit operates and understanding that your brain is always learning something when you reach for a drink. And if all of your focus is on, just say no.

Then, when you do say no, you're going to feel a lot of like, hey, this sucks. This is not fun. This is not enjoyable. I don't feel connected. I don't know how to shut off my brain until you actually do the work to learn a new way. This is what I teach people, really. It's not about how to say no.

It's about learning a new set of skills that you unconsciously taught your brain. Hey, alcohol, this is what solves it. This is the solution because that's when habit change becomes lasting and permanent. When you realize that, oh, I don't need to rely on discipline anymore because I have this new skill. I have this new way to deal with how I'm feeling, what I'm thinking, deal with my frustrations, deal with my stress, and deal with the fact that this party just doesn't feel as fun or as festive without a drink in my hand.

All of a sudden, instead of trying to grit your teeth and just push your way through, you realize, oh, I've taught my brain a new way to show up. I've learned a new set of skills, but it only starts when you get curious about

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what your brain is learning when you reach for a drink. Alright, 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-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.