

Ep #329: I Should Be Able to Figure This Out On My Own



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With Your Host

Rachel Hart

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Ep #329: I Should Be Able to Figure This Out On My Own

You are listening to the *Take A Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, Episode 329.

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.

Welcome back, everybody. Today, I want to talk about one belief that I think pretty much everyone who struggles with their drinking, struggles with saying no, feels like their attempts to change or cut back are very hit-or-miss. It's really a belief that pretty much everyone struggles with; all of us share. I shared this for a long time.

And it's a belief that keeps so many people stuck for so long. It kept me stuck for over a decade. I think it keeps people stuck for even longer than that. And I want you don't understand what it is. I want you to understand why we all share this belief. And I want to give you today, some new ways to think about it.

So, the one belief that I think pretty much everybody shares, when it comes to trying to drink less, trying to cut back, trying to stop, just trying to change your relationship with alcohol is: I should be able to figure out my drinking on my own. I should be able to figure this out on my own. And like I said, I had this for a very long time. This was my belief, as well. I see it come up over and over and over again when I work with people.

But I was thinking a lot recently, why are we so determined to figure this out on our own? And as I was thinking about it, I was thinking about all of the messages that we get about drinking. I talk about this a lot on the podcast. So, we're talking a lot about the thoughts that basically make the structure of the habit.

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

Ep #329: I Should Be Able to Figure This Out On My Own

Some of those thoughts might just be, “I’m more fun when I have a drink.” Some of them are also about what it means to drink or not to drink, what it means about you as a person. And some of them, I think, are also these kinds of more subtle messages that we may not even realize impact our own drinking. But I believe that most people have had a lifetime of being told how to drink, without getting any instruction.

What do I mean by that? I mean, hearing when you’re a kid, “Just say no.” Hearing messages like, “You should really know when to say when.” That was a big messaging campaign. That was, I think it was Budweiser, that did it in the 80s or 90s. Messages that you see on alcohol advertisements all the time, “Drink responsibly. Enjoy in moderation.” We hear versions of these messages over and over and over again.

And I want you to see the one thing that all of them have in common. They’re telling us what we should be doing, right? “Just know when to say when. Just enjoy in moderation. Just say no.” So, they’re telling us what we should be doing without offering any guidance about how to do that.

I think it’s really important to understand then what happens in the brain. Because there is then a conclusion that your brain starts to draw. Now, I don’t think this is necessarily happening on a conscious level. I think this is really happening at the subconscious level. And you may not even be aware that your brain is trying to take these messages that you’re getting over and over and trying to make sense of them.

But what I think happens is that when you hear things like this, “Just know when to say when. Just enjoy in moderation.” When you get these messages over and over again and no one’s offering you any instruction about how to do that, what your brain ends up doing is interpreting this message to mean, “Okay, if no one is explaining how to do this, it must be easy, right? Like, everyone must know-how to do this. So, I guess

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

Ep #329: I Should Be Able to Figure This Out On My Own

moderation, I guess the ability to say no, it's just something I should instinctively know-how to do.”

I want you to think about what happens when your brain has that belief, “I should just instinctively know-how to do this.” Because there is then a second conclusion that your brain will then make.

So, “If I'm supposed to know-how to do this. If I'm just supposed to know when to say when. If I'm just supposed to know-how to drink responsibly, and I can't figure it out on my own; I'm having a hard time, some of my behaviors don't make sense, my attempts are hit or miss, it feels like a struggle. If I can't figure this out on my own, and I'm supposed to know-how to do this, something must be wrong with me.”

And I believe this is why so many people are really determined not to need help. So, you may not even understand that it is part of the interpretation that your brain is making when it hears these messages. But I guarantee that a lot of people, a lot of you out there, feel very strongly, as did I. I should just be able to figure this out on my own. I shouldn't need help.

And I think sometimes, this is actually where the beauty of the think-feel-act cycle, the beauty of understanding, “Hey, my body doesn't make a move towards a drink without a thought and a feeling unfolding in my mind, right?” It doesn't just happen, there actually is a logic to it.

I actually think this is a place where the think-feel-act cycle can sometimes keep you stuck. Certainly, when I was exposed to this idea for the first time, the idea that my drinking didn't just happen. It was both liberating, and kind of exciting. Like, “Oh, I can make sense of this.”

And it was also, in a way, a little bit scary for me, maybe even a little bit upsetting. Because I was like, “Well, okay, if now I understand what's going

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

Ep #329: I Should Be Able to Figure This Out On My Own

on. If now I can see that it doesn't just happen. Why am I still struggling? Why am I still making decisions that I don't like? What's going on?"

This is why I talk about so much the difference between knowledge and know-how. I've talked about this on the podcast before, the difference between knowledge and know-how, and I think it's something that's so important to understand. And many of us have really no idea. I know I didn't really understand the difference for a long time.

So, knowledge really is the theoretical understanding of a subject. And that for me, was what the think-feel-act cycle, when I was first introduced to it, that's what it was. It was understanding, "Hey, my actions don't just happen. Right? What I do around drinking doesn't just happen. It's created, always, by what I'm thinking and what I'm feeling."

All of a sudden, I had this amazing understanding of something that felt just so perplexing to me. Now, you can't change just with knowledge. I think that's where a lot of us get stuck. We think, "Okay, I get it. It makes sense. I finally understand what's happening. This should be enough to change."

But you also need know-how. Know-how is that practical skill, that expertise; "I'm skilled at allowing my urges instead of obeying them or resisting them or hiding from them. I'm skilled at just allowing that urge to be there without a lot of drama. And actually, feeling kind of peaceful around it." So, knowledge and know-how really are the difference between theory and practice.

I think what happens a lot of times is, we are very determined to figure this out on our own because of all of the messages that we have gotten, that we should know how to do this; it should just come naturally, it should be instinctive. And then, we finally find some information, right? We finally start to get that kind of theoretical understanding of what is actually going on.

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

Ep #329: I Should Be Able to Figure This Out On My Own

And then, that actually reinforces the belief, “See? Okay, now I know what's happening. Now I know that my drinking doesn't just happen. I understand how these thoughts and these feelings are actually leading to me to go to the liquor store and to open up the bottle and to pour a drink and pour another and pour another. I can see all of that is happening. So, why isn't that enough?”

That's because theory is never enough. We need to actually practice. We need to teach our brain the skill. Knowledge does not teach your brain a new skill. You need know-how and that's what so many people are missing.

So many people are in this place of: I've got to figure it out on my own because I'm supposed to be able to do it. Because nobody ever tells you what to do. But they just say, “You don't just know when to say when.” They tell me, “Drink responsibly,” I hear this over and over again, and nobody's telling me how.

My brain is making it mean, “Okay, I guess it should be easy. I guess I should just know how to do this.” And so, I'm very confused by the decisions that I'm making. I don't understand why I'm not learning my lesson. I don't understand why I see these negative consequences, and then go back and make the same decision again.

So, that is all very confusing. And then, here's this woman talking about the think-feel-act cycle, and it makes so much sense. It finally explained something, I get it. But I'm still not changing. What on earth?

That is a moment where you can really start to use the think-feel-act cycle against yourself. Because now it's like, “Well, I've got the reason. I've got the understanding. So now, something really must be wrong with me, because I'm still making the same decision. It's not working.”

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

Ep #329: I Should Be Able to Figure This Out On My Own

But there's nothing wrong with you. It's just that you're kind of stopping the process of change at theory. You're stopping the process of change at an intellectual understanding, instead of saying, "I need to practice. I need to create this know-how. I need to develop this skill, this expertise. I need to learn how to actually allow my urges, stop believing my excuses, and stop listening to my justifications.

I need to really learn the skill of watching what is happening inside of me; watching that urge unfold. I need to really build and develop the muscle of being able to tolerate some of these emotions, like boredom or deprivation or annoyance or anxiety, whatever it is. I need to be able to tolerate those emotions without immediately drinking over them."

And that piece, I find, keeps so many people stuck. I think sometimes actually, it's really helpful to think about other areas of your life where you may feel kind of similar, right? Similar in the sense of, "I'm doing something that I have a lot of evidence is not great for me. But it feels hard to stop." I was thinking about this recently with social media, and thinking about the messages that we get around social media compared to messages that we get around drinking.

I'll just say this, no one who actually cares about reducing screen time, will say things like, "Just watch TikTok responsibly. Just know when to say when," when it comes to putting down your phone. Right? Nobody says that as soon as their work is done, if they actually care about helping people reduce their screen time.

Because we know there are a whole host of reasons, not only why people want to reduce how much time they spend on their phone or in front of a screen. But we also know that it has a lot of potential negative impact on their wellbeing.

Ep #329: I Should Be Able to Figure This Out On My Own

What I have seen over the last couple of years is article after article really explaining why we struggle with this. And so, we talk about this kind of infinite scroll, right? You can be on Twitter or you can be an Instagram, it's just like no end to the scroll. The infinite scroll that most social media platforms have, in fact, probably all of them.

That infinite scroll, we now know, it really manipulates that brain's reward loop. Because it's just like, "Okay, maybe that reward is coming. Maybe it's coming. Maybe it's coming. Maybe it's coming," and there's no end to your ability to look for it.

We start to now discuss and understand how likes and comments actually trigger a rush of dopamine., You hear me talking about dopamine all the time on the podcast. They trigger a rush of dopamine that keeps bringing us back for more. And over time it may become harder to resist. Every time, we're getting that little bit of pleasure.

You may have heard about how notifications, all the little dings and buzzes and red flags and all those things, all the notifications really tap into your brain's desire for novelty. Your brain is always on the lookout for something new, because being able to spot new things in your environment, well, that helped with survival. So, our brain has this desire for novelty, and notifications it may make it hard to kind of put down the phone when it's always, "Ooh, what could that be? What's that?"

And I think it's so valuable and important that so much of the conversation around social media is talking about how the brain works. Because what happens is that most people, we are so quick to blame ourselves when we look at our actions and they appear illogical, right?

You might be thinking to yourself, "I know I don't feel good when I spend two hours on my phone in the evening. I know that it's affecting my mental wellbeing. It's making me more anxious. I have this evidence that I don't

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

Ep #329: I Should Be Able to Figure This Out On My Own

feel good about it. I just don't even like how I'm spending my day. I just don't like going into my phone settings and seeing the amount of time I was on my phone. So therefore, I should just be able to stop scrolling and put it down.”

But of course, we know that it's not as simple as that. And here's the thing, the more you understand all of these unseen forces that are influencing your behavior, the more you start to recognize something that's so important. “Hey, I'm not the problem. This isn't about me. This isn't about a weakness inside of me.”

These companies design social media to exploit features in the brain. And so, reducing screen time, if it feels hard, if it feels like a struggle, if I have all this evidence that it's not great for me. If I don't like just being on my phone this much and I'm struggling, I don't have to make it mean that I'm broken. I don't have to make it mean that there's something that I'm missing. That there's something wrong with me.

Because now I can start to see, this isn't just a matter of knowing when to say when, of doing that something, that I logically know is good for me. This is a matter of me really being able to figure out, “Okay, if I know that social media is exploiting my brain circuitry, well, how am I actually going to go about it to change? How am I going to start to work with my brain instead of against it.”

I really do believe that we're working against our brain when we're telling ourselves, “I should just know how to do this. This shouldn't be so hard.” And listen, I know that some of you are listening right now, and you're probably like, “Okay, Rachel. But alcohol is not TikTok. Humans have been drinking for thousands of years.”

But I want you to consider that, yeah, TikTok is really new. But alcohol is still very new to the human brain. It doesn't seem like that, right? Because

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

Ep #329: I Should Be Able to Figure This Out On My Own

we're like, no, no, thousands of years, right? Five thousand years ago they were figuring out how to make wine and how to make beer.

I want you to think, that intoxicating beverages, they've only been around for like 1.6% of human existence. Which means, in evolutionary terms, it's still very new. And I think it's really important to just understand that. I'm still dealing with a very highly concentrated reward that the brain is like, "Whoa, what is this?"

Remember, rewards, the purpose of rewards in the brain were to help with survival. So of course, the lower brain is always going to prioritize, "Hey, this reward, I think it's important." Especially as you're starting to learn, and the pieces of the habit are starting to kind of come together. You're learning, in your subconscious, "Hey, I don't need to be here and be bored. The solution of boredom? Have a drink. Hey, I don't need to feel anxious, I can just drink. Oh, alcohol, that's the thing that's going to make something more special, more celebratory."

So, not only do we have this highly concentrated reward, but then your brain, as you consume it, your brain is starting to learn all of these things that then are influencing your drinking. And unless you understand what that is, it's very hard then to figure out how to change your relationship. You have to see the whole picture.

Now, again, I say the kind of like, I know what you're thinking, because I can imagine me listening to this version of the podcast being like, "Okay, fine. It's a very concentrated reward. But what about all these other people in my life, that seem to naturally know how to say no, right? What about those people in my life? They weren't taught anything. Nobody gave them any instruction. It's still a concentrated reward for their brain, so how come it's so easy for them and so hard for me?"

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

Ep #329: I Should Be Able to Figure This Out On My Own

This is why I titled my book *Why Can't I Drink Like Everyone Else?* That truly was my underlying belief, "It's easy for these other people. Something is wrong with me." And what I want you to consider, and this is really important, just because some people may be better at resisting temptation, it doesn't mean that you can't learn how.

So, let's just take it out of the realm of alcohol. Think about the person in your life that's really musical, maybe they have an amazing ear. That doesn't mean that you can't learn how to play guitar. Think about the person in your life, maybe it's a cousin who has incredible hand-eye coordination. That doesn't mean, because your hand-eye coordination is not as good, that doesn't mean that you can't improve at pickleball.

Maybe you have a friend who has a real knack for foreign languages. I had a friend like this in my life, who it seemed like, every time she wanted to learn a new foreign language, it was like all of a sudden Diane was speaking it. But just because she had a knack for foreign languages, doesn't mean you can't master the basics of a new language.

Now, if you have been a longtime listener, you have heard me talk about my struggle with learning German. I think this is such an important point, because I don't care what skill you're trying to learn. I don't care if you're trying to learn how to play a guitar or play pickleball or learn a language or ride a bike. Or allow an urge or not believe your excuses or learn how to observe what's happening in your body.

Any new skill that you're trying to learn will be next to impossible if you also believe, "This shouldn't be so hard. The fact that I'm struggling is a problem. Needing extra help, needing extra instruction, asking questions is embarrassing. If I can't figure this out on my own, then something must be wrong with me."

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

Ep #329: I Should Be Able to Figure This Out On My Own

When you have those thoughts about any struggle, with any skill, that you are trying to learn, you will just end up feeling defeated and giving up. And yet, this is the exact mindset that most people have about drinking, “This shouldn't be hard. This shouldn't be something that I struggle with. I shouldn't need help with this. I shouldn't need instruction. If I can't figure this out on my own, then something must be wrong with me.”

That is what keeps so many people stuck. I think it really is so important to see that change is not just, “Hey, I logically understand how my brain works. Therefore, it should all fall into place.” Listen, you hear me talk about this all the time, I do believe that understanding the basics of how the brain works is essential. I do believe it's essential to understand how habits are formed and how the reward system works in your brain.

Yeah, these are very simple things that anyone can learn the basics of, and I don't understand why we aren't taught about these things. I think we should learn about it. Not just around drinking, not just around urges, but we should learn about it just because we should learn about how our brain works. And most people have no knowledge about this. So yes, you need that. But also, you need to practice tools that work with your brain instead of fighting against it.

I was teaching a class about this yesterday, talking about tools that are working with your brain instead of fighting against it. We're fighting against our brain when we're constantly in this place of, “The only way that I can be successful is if I'm avoiding; avoiding being around alcohol, avoiding my urges, isolating myself. Or gritting my teeth, using willpower, and kind of sucking it up. Not having a good time, but just grinning and bearing it.”

You have to actually practice tools that really start to work with your brain. That's what really starting to understand how to *use* the think-feel-act cycle, not just how it works, but how do you use it? How do you deploy it? Really

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

Ep #329: I Should Be Able to Figure This Out On My Own

understanding, how do I start to allow my urges? What does that look like? How do I develop a different relationship with my urges?

There are so many ways to do this, but it's beyond avoidance and willpower, right? It really is teaching your brain a new way to respond. So, you need the practice. And that practice is very difficult when we are also bringing in the belief system "This shouldn't be hard," right? "I shouldn't need this extra help. I shouldn't need this instruction. Asking questions is embarrassing. If I can't do it on my own, then something's wrong with me."

I will tell you, the other piece that you need is learning how to fail better. Most of us are terrible at failure. We all need to learn how to fail better in all areas of our life. But this, especially. When something doesn't work, are you able to actually use that moment, of a tool not working? Use that moment of breaking your commitment or drinking more than you wanted to, are you actually able to use it as a pathway to success rather than another way to beat yourself up?

I certainly did not know how to do that. Every time I failed, every time I broke a promise, every time I said I was going to be good and I wasn't, it was just an invitation for my meanest version of myself, that internal critic, to swoop in. And that internal critic, their job is not to support you when you're feeling your lowest, right? The job of the internal critic is not to offer different perspectives or teach you new skills. It's job is just to make you feel awful.

I think because so many of us have believed, I believed for a long time, "If I just feel bad enough, then I will change." That is part of the problem of shame-based approaches, this idea that we just have to feel bad enough in order to change.

The problem is when that internal critic swoops in and says, "God, you screwed up again. What's wrong with you? Why can't you figure this out?"

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

Ep #329: I Should Be Able to Figure This Out On My Own

When are you're going to learn your lesson? Why can't you do what's good for you?" Because of course, you've had a lifetime of getting these messages of, "Hey, just know when to say when. Just say no. Drink responsibly. Enjoy in moderation."

When you have all of that kind of hopelessness and shame and feeling defeated, and that internal critic swoops in because you think that you should just know how to do this, what happens is you might spend days or weeks or even months, not just beating yourself up, but maybe trying to forget what happened. Not even wanting to examine what went wrong because you've got so much shame.

Maybe you're trying to pretend nothing's wrong. Maybe you're setting rules that are really about punishing yourself, like, "This isn't going to last." Or maybe you're just abandoning all restriction and embarking on a kind of free-for-all.

You can see how these steps are not going to actually get you to where you want to go. They're not going to actually help you create a different relationship with alcohol. I will tell you this, I think, really everything, everything starts with the willingness to challenge this thought, "I should be able to figure it out on my own. I should be able to do this on my own. The think-feel-act cycle makes so much sense, so I should just know better."

Now, you need more than knowledge, you need know-how. This is why I tell people all the time, that I work with, I say, "Listen, this is like going to the gym for your mind. You're going to get a workout. It's not always going to be a piece of cake. There is going to be struggle. Because guess what? That's how we know that we're actually teaching our brain something new. That's how we know that we're actually creating a new neural pathway."

As long as we hold on to this fallacy, "You know what? It should be easy. It should just be something that I could naturally, and instinctively know how

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

Ep #329: I Should Be Able to Figure This Out On My Own

to do.” That will keep you stuck more than anything. And think about it, yeah, do I believe that some people are better at resisting temptation? They are kind of naturally better when their brain encounters a high reward substance? They may have more natural ability to say no? Of course, I do.

Because I think, humanity, we're all different. Just like some people are more musical. Just like some people have more hand-eye coordination. Some people have a knack for foreign languages. I mean, the list goes on and on. But that doesn't mean, if those things aren't something that you find yourself kind of easily able to do, that doesn't mean that you can't change.

And why it has been so difficult, why you have encountered so many problems and so much struggle, is both the belief “I should be able to do it on my own.” And all the thoughts that you bring with you unknowingly, about how this shouldn't be hard, you shouldn't need help, you shouldn't have to ask questions, and this should be easier. If I can't do it on my own, then something must be wrong with me.

You would be learning and you would be able to make progress a million times faster with the mindset of “You know what? This isn't just about knowing better. This isn't just about knowledge. I actually need know-how. I need practice.

And I need more than just regular practice, I also need to learn how to fail better. I need to see any missteps along the way as ‘Hey, maybe that's not a setback, maybe that's a stepping stone.’ Maybe that misstep will actually help me understand how the habit works on a deeper level. Maybe that so-called misstep is actually part of the path to my eventual success.”

Most people never see it that way. That's one of the biggest things that I spend time on, not only in my own life constantly reinforcing that message with myself, but also with everyone that I work with. We can't just logically know how a habit works in order to change it. Step one, understand the

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

Ep #329: I Should Be Able to Figure This Out On My Own

basics of your brain. But then it requires practice. It requires learning how to fail better. It requires using those moments of failure as a moment for curiosity. Figuring out why something didn't work and practicing something new again.

If you could do that over and over, we call it the 1-2-3 Process inside of *Take a Break*, if you could do that over and over, you will be able to change so much more quickly.

All right, that's it for today. I'll 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 empowered to take it or leave it. Head on over to www.RachelHart.com/join and start your transformation today.