

Ep #340: Thought Sabotage



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With Your Host

Rachel Hart

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Ep #340: Thought Sabotage

You are listening to the *Take A Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, Episode 340.

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.

Hello, everyone. We're going to talk today about thought sabotage. I've been thinking about this a lot lately. I've been coaching on this a lot lately. It's something that I really want to help all of you start to understand. Really starting to wrap your brain around the ways in which your thought patterns are what's really getting in the way of your ability to change your drinking and change your relationship with alcohol, can be incredibly empowering, and incredibly kind of freeing.

To start to see, oh, maybe there's nothing wrong with me. Maybe it's this thought that has been on repeat for years, if not decades, that really is the problem. One of the things that I love about the think-feel-act cycle, which is the premise of everything that I'm teaching here, is really helping you understand that your body doesn't make a move, it doesn't reach for that drink, without something unfolding in your mind first.

One of the things that I love so much, is starting to see, maybe I just need to edit a sentence. That's it, there's just a sentence in my mind that I need to start to chip away at, edit and reframe. That's a skill that we all have. We all know how to do that. You don't have to be an English major. You don't have to be an English teacher. We all know how to start to rework words and write things a little bit differently. We just don't realize that we can apply that skill to ourselves.

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

Ep #340: Thought Sabotage

It's so empowering to see that not only can you really identify, hey, why is this happening? Why am I saying yes? Why am I going back for more? I can identify it, but I can also change it. I can change my response to urges. I can learn how to talk back to my excuses, in a believable way. I can start to understand what the drink has come to represent in my mind. All of that information will be so helpful.

Really seeing this as skills that you are practicing, you can develop, and you can get better at. Here's the thing, I want to put it out there that this really is the antithesis of what we usually hear when it comes to any kind of struggle around alcohol.

What we usually hear, what I heard pretty much my entire life is, "Some people just can't drink. Alcohol makes them powerless. One drop for these people, it's going to set them back." That was really the end of the conversation.

I think it's important to juxtapose that with how we want to empower people and why we think empowering messages are important. Right? In so many other situations, what we will say is it's important to believe in people and to believe in someone's ability to grow and evolve, overcome hardship and obstacle. It's important to give people the tools and the resources that they need to succeed. It's important to enable people to become an authority in their life, make their own decisions, and feel in control. All of that is good.

When you empower people, you make it more likely that they're going to achieve their goals. They're going to fulfill their potential. I think, across the board, we think that empowering ideas and messages, and empowering people is all good, and disempowering is bad. Except in the realm of drugs and alcohol, then our tune changes. Then, the message is admitting that you're powerless is the only solution.

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

Ep #340: Thought Sabotage

What I want to offer here, what I'm asking all of you to consider is, what if admitting that you're powerless is one of many solutions, and what if it's not the right solution for everyone? Perhaps we have been painting with too broad of a brush with that message.

I will tell you this, because you know I know as soon as I start to go into this topic it feels like it can get really heated, right? Because people see the ravages of drugs and alcohol. I live in San Francisco. We currently have a Fentanyl crisis. We're not the only place in the country. Fentanyl is a synthetic opioid. It's something like 80 to 100 times more powerful than something like morphine.

So, the thing is, you're not going to hear me paint with a broad brush with everything. You're not going to hear me talking about learning the skill of how to mindfully consume fentanyl, or the ability to watch the think-feel-act cycle unfold once you've had a little bit. But I am going to talk about it with alcohol. I do believe that it's possible with alcohol.

I think, if, as a society, we're going to make it so widely available, then it is our responsibility to provide people with tools and multiple options, rather than a very binary black-and-white approach. Also, an approach that for a lot of people is like, let's just see what happens. We've really put ourselves, as a society, in a kind of crazy paradox.

On the one hand, we accept that alcohol is just really available everywhere; grocery stores, restaurants, airplanes, sporting events. Alcohol is right up there with caffeine and nicotine as one of the most widely used and consumed psychotropic drugs in the world.

Yet, we offer basically no guidance other than just say, no, don't get behind the wheel when you've been drinking. Stand up to peer pressure. Learn your lesson. If you make a mistake, don't do the same stupid thing again. PS, if it's hard for you to say no, then you have to admit that you're

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

Ep #340: Thought Sabotage

powerless. You have a problem. Lifelong abstinence is the only solution. That's really it. That's the guidance. We're just kind of like, okay, you're 21, have a go, see what happens.

Of course, a lot of us, myself included, start drinking well before we're 21. So, that's really kind of the limitation of the messaging that we're getting. I think what has happened over time, is that we have taken a message, a message of being powerless when it comes to alcohol, that was meant for a very small percentage of chronic severe drinkers. We have taken that message and applied it to anyone and everyone who struggles.

It's this binary view of drinking; either you're a normal drinker, or you're an alcoholic. Either you have control, or you don't have control, and you're powerless. It's this binary view that is part of the problem, and also doesn't reflect the reality of a lot of people's experience. There are so many degrees of struggle. You hear me talk about this all the time, so many degrees.

Having this one-size-fits-all approach, I believe, is actually part of the problem. It's actually something that keeps a lot of people stuck. It's part of the problem, with thought sabotage. Right? If you were to take everyone together, everyone in the world who may struggle at some point with their drinking, who may find it difficult to say no, who may listen to their excuses. If you take all those people...

The stat that I've heard again and again, it's something about 10 to 15% of those people are chronic, severe, heavy drinkers who require medical intervention. Everybody else, all those other people who have some degree of struggle, 85 to 90% of that group, those people who are in the mild to moderate range, we're still giving that same one-size-fits-all message.

Alcohol makes you powerless. Lifelong abstinence is the only solution. Believing that you have any power once you start is a fool's errand. Listen,

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

Ep #340: Thought Sabotage

I can acknowledge that that message may be appropriate for some people. But I believe that giving it across the board to everyone is the real problem. It's incredibly disempowering to a huge group of people. When we're giving that message, it can actually get in the way, and sabotage your ability to change.

I think that, as a society, we don't want to talk about it. We don't want to acknowledge it. We just want to kind of stick with, nope, this is what we're supposed to believe. This is why it's so important, and why I want to talk to you, about thought sabotage.

So, it's not just about the beliefs that disempower you, but it's how they can actually block your ability to change something that you're able to change. What I see, what I see coming up, it came up in my own journey. It comes up with people that I work with all the time. What I see as kind of one of the biggest culprits is the thought, "I can't control myself. I feel out of control."

I just want to acknowledge right now that these thoughts can be really painful and scary. They can make you feel hopeless. You can have a lot of shame, a lot of fear, a lot of negative emotions come up. Sometimes, so much negative emotion is there that we don't even want to acknowledge that the thought is even there, right? We don't want to even acknowledge that a part of ourselves is like, "Oh, I don't know. Maybe I can't control myself. I certainly feel out of control sometimes."

One of the things that I see happen a lot is that then we think the solution is okay, well, let me prove that I can control myself. I was very fixated on this for a long time. But the problem is that when you don't understand the think-feel-act cycle, you don't understand what is driving your actions. What you end up doing is you try to change your actions in this void.

You're trying to change a behavior from a place of believing, and at the same time, that you can't really control yourself. That's not going to work.

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

Ep #340: Thought Sabotage

Your thoughts lead to how you're showing up with alcohol, your behavior. If you want to change your actions, you need to go back and change your thoughts first.

This is a place where I think it can start to really sound like, "What is this woman talking about? Am I supposed to just start walking around la-di-da? I believe I have all this control, when here I am with all this evidence that, wait... But look at all these moments where I drank too much. Look at all these moments where I woke up the next day feeling regretful."

So, it's important, when you're doing this work, not to go to this place of rainbows and sunshine, everything's amazing, and I'm just going to force myself to believe these empowering thoughts that I don't actually believe. I'm talking about going to that place, first, of just getting curious and questioning why it's there.

With a thought, like, "I can't control myself. I feel like I can't control myself," I think that's because there's so much fear, often on the part of the person thinking this. I think sometimes there's a lot of fear on the part of someone hearing someone else say this. That that fear really gets in the way of having any curiosity around it.

That fear blocks us from questioning, hey, where did that thought come from? Right? So, we immediately go to this place of just accepting it as the truth and then kind of moving on from there. But here's the thing, what if it's not the truth? Because I will tell you this, when I started getting curious, I started questioning this thought that, by the way, did create a ton of fear inside of me.

I started to realize; you know what? I've had some version of this thought that I can't control myself long before I ever started drinking, long before. I remember being nine or 10 years old, and having this thought around food; eating so fast and so quickly. Having so much desire to have more; more is

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

Ep #340: Thought Sabotage

better. I want to definitely have more than my sister. I wanted to be able to eat the most.

I remember also having this belief that I can't control myself around some of my emotions, and a lot of anger. As a kid, it was really hard for me to contain that anger. Once I lost my temper, it was like, okay, well, that's it. It's just impossible to rein myself in. There were other examples, too. But I think about the areas in my life where I really, truly felt out of control as a kid.

It was scary. It was confusing. I think it was scary and confusing for the people around me, too. But then, here's the question, which came first? The belief that I was out of control, or the out-of-control behavior? And how did the thought 'I'm out of control, or I feel out of control,' how did that go on to shape and influence all sorts of areas in my life? Not just my drinking, but my identity?

Was I really out of control, way back when I was nine or 10 years old, and I kept going back for more food? When I got so angry that I just couldn't stop yelling? Was I really out of control, or was something very normal unfolding inside of me that no one was helping me understand?

No one was explaining. No one was giving me tools to manage, other than you shouldn't do that. Maybe I wasn't out of control. Maybe I was just in an information void. And in the absence of information, helping me understand what was going on, helping to normalize what was happening inside of me, what did I do? I just came up with my own explanation, as our brain is wont to do.

The brain wants to understand what is going on. Why am I doing these things? My little brain came up with an explanation that I think a lot of you can relate to. "I think maybe something's wrong with you. I think maybe you're just a person who..." fill in the blank, right? "I think you're just

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

Ep #340: Thought Sabotage

someone who can't control yourself. I think you're someone who's just missing an off switch.”

You hear me talk about that thought, that I had for a very long time. My little brain was trying to come up with an explanation. Hey, this is why you do these things. This is where I see thought sabotage come in. Because the thought “I can't control myself. I feel like I can't control myself,” these thoughts, they don't feel good. They feel terrible.

So, why not choose to think about our thought? Well, if someone had told me, “Rachel, why not just choose to think about our thought,” I mean, I think I would have been pretty angry at them, actually. Because it's like, you don't know me, you don't know my life. I have all of this evidence. Right? You're not living my life. I'm living my life. I have all of this evidence, that I can put before you, upholding this belief. That yeah, I just don't have a lot of control.

I would have looked at someone like they were crazy if they had just suggested thinking a more empowering thought, or more positive thought. But I think it's important to really start to see why we cling to these thoughts that not only get in the way of change, but are so incredibly painful. We're clinging to it because we have a lot of evidence, and because they're so easy to believe.

This is where understanding your brain and understanding the think-feel-act cycle is so powerful. Because perhaps you are mistaking the speed at which your brain hands you an explanation, for your behavior. Perhaps you are mistaking the speed for the truth.

When your brain is saying, “We are out of control, something is wrong with you, you're missing something, you don't have something that other people have, you're broken, you're not good enough,” whatever it is, perhaps you are mistaking speed as a sign of truth about who you are.

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

Ep #340: Thought Sabotage

I want to explain what I mean by that. Because way back when, whatever it is, we had absolutely nothing to do with alcohol way back. When your little brain was trying to understand the behavior, why am I doing this thing? I don't eat all that candy. Why am I struggling in school? Why does that person not want to be my friend?

We all have these things happen in our lives that our brain is trying to make sense of. It's trying to just figure out how to be a human in this world. I will tell you this over and over again, that little brain is just coming up with some not very good answers. So often, we're defaulting to 'I think that happened because of some sort of flaw or defect in me and who I am.'

I will just have you consider, why is this everyone's default explanation? Why do so many of us believe that something is wrong with us? That we don't measure up? That we aren't good enough? When you start to see that everybody starts to have this belief across the board, maybe in very different areas, but there's this kind of fundamental belief that something about me is not enough, you have to consider that it might not be a coincidence. Right?

Perhaps you're not the problem. Perhaps the problem is that we are swimming in this messaging. That our behaviors, the things that we do, are the result of our goodness or badness. Right? That message is just in the air that we breathe. We're surrounded with this. We are constantly, as a society, making the person the problem. Oh, they did that because they're bad.

We are constantly labeling behaviors as wrong. You look wrong, you sound wrong, you act wrong, collectively. As a society, we're very good at saying, people are bad, and these things are wrong. So, it's no wonder that our little brains, when we're trying to figure out hey, why am I doing these things? Why is this happening? And we're in this information void, this void

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

Ep #340: Thought Sabotage

of explanation about how habits work and how the brain works, and what's normal, right?

It's kind of no surprise that we're defaulting to an explanation of our own inherent badness or wrongness inside of us. So, my little brain was examining a confusing behavior and coming up with a crappy explanation. Then, assuming that this was the truth, right?

I did this because something is wrong with me, because something is different with me, because something about me is not like everyone else, I'm not good enough, I don't measure up, I'm missing something, I'm broken, I'm bad. Here's all my evidence, because see? I keep doing the same thing even though people tell me that I shouldn't be doing it. I must really not be able to control myself.

That was the premise that I had about who I was, for the longest time. I just kept thinking that thought, and I kept collecting more evidence to back it up. I was never collecting evidence for the opposite. That nothing was wrong with me. I was perfectly okay. Nothing about me needed to change. I was good enough, just as I was.

Because our thoughts can act like blinders on us. We can't even see the evidence proving that the opposite might also be true. So, around, and around we go, repeating this same think-feel-act cycle, unknowingly, for years, if not decades, and creating this neural pathway in our brain.

Remember, your brain learns things really quickly when you're young. So, we're practicing this, and we get really good at thinking this thought. We get really good at finding evidence for it. Soon, it's just part of our brain's operating system. It's what we default to.

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

Ep #340: Thought Sabotage

We come up with a painful explanation for our behavior so fast and so easily, that it feels like we weren't coming up with an explanation at all. It's just the truth. It's just who we are. This is the problem. We are all mistaking the speed at which the brain can spit out an answer. We're mistaking it as to be the truth about who we are.

Then, here's the flip side, we mistake the difficulty we have was starting to shift that thought, and thinking a more positive thought we mistake that difficulty with yeah, I mean, it's hard because it's obviously not true, right? It's not true that I have a lot of control. It's not true there's nothing wrong with me. It's not true. I don't need fixing. It's not true that I'm totally worthy, and lovable just as I am.

We mistake the difficulty of starting to think the opposite, to be a sign that yeah, that can't possibly be true, because see how hard it is for me? Instead of understanding that these thoughts are challenging to think. They're challenging to find evidence for, simply because there is no well-worn path in my brain.

The well-worn path in my brain is attached with the painful thought that something's wrong with me. That's where the well-worn path is. It really is like comparing a superhighway that you can zoom down at 90 miles an hour, with bushwhacking through the jungle that's going to be much slower going.

Yes, the highway is going to be faster. But that doesn't mean it's taking you to the destination that you want. It doesn't mean that thought is creating the result that is serving you. Bushwhacking may be slow at first, but you know what might be the actual direction that you want to be headed in. But we are mistaking speed for truth.

The only way to break out of this, the only way to get out of this pattern where our own thoughts are sabotaging our ability to change, is to have

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

Ep #340: Thought Sabotage

this willingness not only to question our own interpretations of why we do the things that we do, but also the willingness to break out of this binary explanation that society has. That there's only one explanation and only one solution.

You have to be willing to challenge all of it. You have to be willing to start to question the explanation that your brain has come up with for why you struggle with your drinking and why it's hard for you to say no. Your default explanation about your urges, your excuses, your ability to stay committed, and how much control that you have.

It's your willingness to embrace that, possibly, something else could be true. Even if it's hard to think right now, that's not a sign that it isn't true. It's perhaps a sign that we don't have a lot of practice with thinking that thought about ourselves.

Thought sabotage, it's a mistake looking speed, for the truth about who you are, what's possible, and your ability to change. I promise you this, you can always go back to thinking the thought if you really want to. I'm just offering up, what would happen if you questioned that? What would happen if you started to get curious about where it came from? What would happen if you started to examine the thoughts that you have about your drinking?

If you started to see, huh, did I have them? Maybe, well before I even started drinking. Where did they start to show up in my life, and who was explaining why I did certain things and why? You know, other people did certain things. What was the message that I was getting? Questioning all of this really is the path to creating a completely different relationship. Not only with alcohol and urges and excuses, but a different relationship with yourself.

Alright, that's it for today. I will see you next week.

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

Ep #340: Thought Sabotage

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.