

Ep #386: The Connector: What the Brain Learns



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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 386.

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.

Hey, everyone, welcome back. This is part of an eight-part series that I am doing. I'm really going into depth on the Drink Archetypes, and what your brain learns when a certain Archetype is activated. I started last week with The Upgrade. Today, we're going to be talking about The Connector.

By the way, if you don't know what your Drink Archetypes are, these are really just the eight different types of drinking that can impact your relationship with alcohol. They are not bad. They're not problematic. There's no kind of wrong or questionable Archetype to have. But if you're unsure what your Archetypes are, you can always go to DrinkType.com and take my free quiz.

But today, we're going to be talking all about The Connector Archetype, which is all about your brain associating alcohol with creating, strengthening, or maintaining bonds. So, what I'm going to be doing is really looking and helping you understand how this works with the think-feel-act cycle.

So, when The Connector is activated, what is happening in your mind? What is happening with your thoughts and your feelings? And importantly, what are you doing, beyond just maybe getting up and going to have a drink, or reaching for another? It's so important to understand this piece.

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Because if you want to create a sustainable, lasting, vastly different relationship with alcohol, it's not just about willpower. It's not just about saying no or gritting your teeth. In fact, when you rely on willpower as your sole, primary tool for change, you will eventually probably get to the point where you just get kind of fed up and give in.

It's about understanding that saying no really is a two-part process. Yes, you need to really learn how to manage your cravings and relate to your desire in a different way. But you have to do this in conjunction with the Archetype that is activated. With, really, the thoughts and the feelings connected to the habit. That's how you create lasting change.

So, we're going to talk about The Connector. Today, I'm going to walk you through the thing think-feel-act cycle. Again, I'm going to be giving you one example; this is not the only way that it can show up. But if you know that The Connector Archetype is something that appears for you, this is often when drinking is a shared activity with friends, family, or maybe your romantic partner. Maybe you find that it makes group dynamics a little bit easier or more enjoyable.

This Archetype, The Connector, it commonly appears when it's hard to separate drinking from your social activities. What I have found is that it tends to show up when just meeting up for drinks is an activity, in and of itself. Or when alcohol is part of a ritual for date night or ritual when you see certain friends and spend time with them, or maybe with your family.

The Connector can show up when you come from a family where get-togethers really revolve around drinking. Or if you marry into a family where that's the case. The Archetype tends to appear when alcohol is really playing a central role in certain group activities or social engagements.

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And for some people, this archetype can show up if you might feel like a regular at a restaurant or a local bar. So, again, you don't have to identify with all of these, it's just to know that when The Connector is activated, saying no to a drink, it can interfere with your desire to feel close to others. And that is going to make it difficult to abstain or moderate.

Now, every single one of the Archetypes has a mindset trap. I think the mindset trap that most often shows up with The Connector is, "I just wish that saying no didn't feel like such a big deal." It's this idea that the fear of being the "buzzkill", it really is the thing that gets in the way for you. Now I will say, what I have seen with The Connector, is that when you have this fear, that somehow this is going to set you apart.

That if you say no, if you're the one abstaining, or if you're the one that's not up for the third round, that that's going to set you apart. What actually happens is that The Connector blocks your ability to find connection. So, rather than bringing you closer, alcohol becomes this wedge.

And so, in order to understand how that happens, you have to really understand the thing think-feel-act cycle. I think it's important to know that humans have long used alcohol's ability to lower your inhibitions and your defenses as a way to facilitate bonding. That is not a bad thing. It's just important to know that as a species we've been doing that for a very long time.

But what you do need to pay attention to is that when alcohol becomes your go-to way to open up, it actually can block your ability to connect with people. And so, what I'm going to do is walk you through an example of how The Connector Archetype can affect your thoughts, feelings, and actions, to really start to form the habit.

One of the things that I do want to add here is that The Connector archetype is different from The Mask. The Mask Archetype is really all

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about dealing with social anxiety. The Connector functions a little bit differently. But there are some pieces that are in common, right?

So, when you think about the idea of using a drink as a way to create, strengthen, or maintain emotional bonds, I think one of the pieces that you have to understand is that there is a piece, when The Connector is activated, we kind of have taught the brain to rely on alcohol's ability to lower inhibitions.

And so, one of the places that I have people realize, is understanding that many times, the place where they're starting from is not necessarily feeling insecure, right? Not feeling social anxiety. It's not necessarily that that is kicked up. But understanding that you may be around other people and not feeling fully relaxed, or feeling a little bit guarded.

Okay, so I'll be talking about The Mask in a future episode. And I'll be talking, really, about how this is different when it shows up with social anxiety. But just to understand with The Connector, that one of the things that is going on here is that kind of starting place of 'I don't feel totally relaxed. I feel a little bit on guard.'

Because the thought that so often comes up when The Connector is activated is, "A drink will make it easier to connect." And just to understand that so often it's the thought that comes up. You start to see, "Well, why would it make it easier? Well, maybe because I'm not fully feeling relaxed. I'm feeling a little bit guarded."

But we're going to work with the think-feel-act cycle today, with this thought, "A drink will make it easier to connect." You have that thought, and it sparks that little bit of desire. A little bit of that feeling of, "Ooh, okay, so I should have a drink, right? Let's open a bottle of wine."

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Now, the action here can seem very obvious. It's just like, "Okay, I go get a bottle of wine. I order a drink. I reach for another." You're reaching for the drink to help facilitate connection. You're reaching for it because alcohol has an ability to lower your inhibitions, to lower your defenses. And when that is lowered, it's easier to facilitate bonding.

But like I was talking about in last week's episode, when we were really understanding it's not just what you're doing, it's also what you're *not* doing; the "action line" really encompasses all of that. When you reach for a drink to facilitate connection, what are some of the things that you're not doing? Now, there can be a whole host of inactions here, but there are three that I see come up kind of most frequently.

Number one, you are not normalizing that it takes time to relax around people. Now, I will say this is true, even with people you know and love and can have a very long relationship with. It is perfectly normal, and in fact, incredibly common for it to take some time to ease into another person's company, or to fully drop your guard.

So, just notice, that so often we don't normalize that, right? We don't think that's even supposed to happen. It's like, "No, these are my friends. No, this is my family. No, this is my partner. This is my spouse. It's my best friend." We don't normalize it. It can take time to just settle in and relax. That is normal.

And so often when I work with people, that thought, that understanding right there, 'it's okay, if you don't feel totally relaxed. If your guard is up a little bit, it's okay,' if that happens even with your people that you love and care about the most in the world, that understanding can create so much relief for people when they are working on The Connector Archetype. So, that's one thing to pay attention to.

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Number two, you're probably not practicing opening up. You're probably not practicing opening up without alcohol, right? Because just being yourself, it requires some amount of vulnerability. Sharing how you feel and what's on your mind means accepting that people, other people, including yourself, may judge you for it.

And when we don't have that practice of opening up and embracing that little bit of vulnerability, you will see that it's kind of like, "Okay, I need to reach for this thing to help me do it." It's literally understanding that this is a muscle that you build, right? Again, this is a really normal and common thing to happen, even with people that we love the most in the world.

It's not just like, "Oh, okay, so I married this person, and now I have no problem whatsoever just being myself, sharing how I feel, and telling them what's on my mind." No, it requires vulnerability, and that can feel challenging. In fact, it's very normal for it to feel challenging. But when we're not practicing opening up, we're not building that muscle; in a way it's really atrophying.

And then finally, often with this archetype, with The Connector archetype, when you reach for the drink to help facilitate connection, you're actually not being curious about others. So, connection requires curiosity about the people that you're with. And if your guard is a little bit up, if you're not fully relaxed... which again, is normal... you may be more focused on kind of protecting yourself from judgment rather than 'what do I actually need to do to forge connection right now?'

You may be a little bit up in your head rather than thinking about the other person in front of you. And I will tell you this, from having worked with so many people, so often, when I work with people on this Archetype, it's like when they are thinking about the other person in front of them, what they notice is their brain is usually thinking about what that person could potentially be thinking about them in a negative way. Alright?

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Building that curiosity with others, really teaching the brain... This is something that you have to teach the brain, especially when you have the opposite in effect, which is “Yeah, I'm thinking about others, but I'm thinking about what they're thinking about me.” That's not good. This is a muscle that you have to build.

So, all of this is happening. All of this is kind of part of that action piece. To really understand, “Yes, I'm reaching for a drink to help facilitate connection, but there's also a bunch here that I'm not doing.” There's a result, always. We always want to look and see, what is the result? What is this think-feel-act cycle creating for me?

And sure, in the short term, alcohol may help you open up around people. But what is happening in the long term? In other words, what is your brain learning? I will tell you this, I have seen this time and time again, in the long term, you may start to feel insecure about certain relationships if alcohol isn't involved.

I want to explain to you why that happens. So, alcohol, it lowers your inhibitions by slowing down activity in your cerebral cortex. When you have less activity in your cerebral cortex, you're going to have less access to self-critical thoughts or fears or worries about what other people think. And as a result, you become more open and talkative, right? That's one of the ways that alcohol is able to lower your inhibitions.

Now, the more that you use alcohol for this purpose... It's kind of like, “I'm starting out from this place of I don't feel totally relaxed, I feel a little bit guarded. And so, I trained my brain to use alcohol as a way to get past how I feel; that I'm not totally relaxed. I'm not totally just comfortable.” The more you use alcohol for this purpose, the less practice you have lowering your defenses and opening up on your own.

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These are skills, right? These are skills that you need to practice and develop. And for most people, especially when The Connector is activated, you don't have a lot of practice doing this. And of course you don't, because it's like, "Well, why bother? Just drink and then I'll feel relaxed, and I won't feel guarded around others."

What then happens is that over time you may start to believe... again, whether consciously or unconsciously... that alcohol is an essential part of certain relationships or activities. Remember, because you just repeated that pattern over and over again of, "I don't feel fully relaxed. I don't feel totally unguarded. And so, I'm going to use a drink as a way to help me connect." And I repeat this over and over again.

I'm not building the muscle of normalizing that it takes time. I'm not practicing opening up on my own. I'm not teaching my brain, I'm not redirecting my brain to be curious about others. And so, over time, I'm developing this belief that alcohol is an essential part of certain relationships or activities.

Okay, but there's more happening. At the same time, your brain is learning to expect a high value reward when you spend time or socialize with certain people. Right? Again, the lower brain is always scanning, it's always trying to memorize, "Where do I get my rewards?"

And the more that you have this thought, "I'm going to have the drink, it will make it easier for us to connect. I'll feel more relaxed," your brain is starting to be like, "Oh, this is what I always do when I see Barb. This is what I do when I hang out with these people." So, your brain is learning to expect that high-value reward.

Now, here's what happens when an expectation is developed. Even thinking about specific people, or thinking about certain social situations, can trigger a craving to drink. Your brain has this expectation, the

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expectation can trigger a craving. Additionally, the idea of not drinking, or drinking less in new situations... I want you to imagine this, for all of you out there who know that The Connector Archetype is something that shows up in your own relationship with alcohol.

What happens when you think about not drinking, or drinking less around certain people, or in certain situations? You probably feel a little anxious or worried, right? Because, again, you have this belief that alcohol is a central part of connecting. It's an essential part of certain relationships or certain activities. Now, the idea of somehow changing that might make you feel a little anxious or a little worried.

So, when the brain senses a threat to a high-value reward, it is incentivized to come up with reasons why the reward is necessary. This is what I'm always talking about with people, with the lower brain, and to really pay attention to. Alright, we have our prefrontal cortex, we have the ability to understand humans don't need alcohol to survive. We do not need alcohol. We have not needed alcohol to forge relationships, community, romantic relationships. Humans were doing that long before.

But again, when that lower brain sees a threat to that high-value reward, it's going to start to come up with reasons why the reward is necessary. It's incentivized to be like... I always kind of think of it... I know, it doesn't really function this way... but I kind of think of it as my lower brain being like, "Okay, what do I need to get her to think?"

I think about that Rolodex of excuses. "What do I need to land on to make it so that it's like, 'yes, forget this. We're not going to change our relationship with alcohol. We're just going to keep things the same?'"

The reason why I talk about this is because I think it's important to understand that part of your brain has a hidden reason to generate anxiety and worry in these situations. It wants you to feel a little anxious and a little

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worried about not drinking, because guess what happens? When you feel a little anxious or a little worried about not drinking, because you think it might threaten the relationship, you're more likely to drink. Right?

You start to see that. “Oh, maybe my anxiety and my worry are actually serving a purpose. Yeah, they don't feel good, but part of my brain understands, hey, when this person feels a little anxious or a little worried about saying no, not drinking, or saying no to another round, and they don't like that anxiety or worry, they're probably more likely to give me the reward.”

So then, here's the other piece, if you try to abstain, or you try to moderate around certain people or doing certain activities, when that Connector Archetype is activated, what will happen is you may start off going into these situations with people feeling a little on edge, or a little defensive or a little self-critical, or a little worried. Right? You're starting off from this place with more negative emotion. Which, guess what? It all gets in the way of the thing that you want, which is to feel connected.

All of this is like the perfect storm to reinforce The Connector Archetype. Because what ends up happening, when people don't understand the Drink Archetypes, and they think that saying no is just a matter of willpower, it's like, “Okay, well, I abstained. I didn't have anything to drink and I just felt disconnected. That sucked. I didn't like that.”

Or, “I tried to limit myself. I was really struggling with that. And then, I gave in and I found relief. I felt more connected.” So, the brain is using both outcomes as proof that alcohol makes it easier to connect. When really, what's happening is it's making you feel more insecure about these relationships. It's making you start to believe that alcohol is an essential or needed part of certain relationships that you have.

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I have this with so many people in my life, and I talk about this a lot in the podcast. When you decide to change your relationship with alcohol, yes, it is true that some of your relationships or your friendships may change, of course. But I will tell you, that for me, and what I've seen for so many people... I was really catastrophizing about kind of all the relationships in my life.

I really had this idea of no, no, no, drinking is essential. This is the thing we do. Just going out for drinks is the activity. And I was so convinced that it was needed. And yeah, some of the relationships and friendships that I had with certain people, some of them, it turned out when you removed alcohol it was like, "I don't know that I have that much in common with this person."

But for the vast majority of my friendships and my relationships in my life really didn't change at all. But I was so convinced. I was so sure that it would. All of that is happening because of the think-feel-act cycle. All of that is happening because of what your brain is learning.

Meanwhile, not only is your brain kind of using these different outcomes, when you don't drink and you feel disconnected, or when you finally do drink and then you feel more connected, not only is your brain using these outcomes as proof that alcohol is making it easier for you to connect and it's necessary for certain relationships, but you're also not practicing the skills needed to create connection. Right?

You're not considering that the relationships that you have with people transcend alcohol. I definitely did not consider that. I really didn't. I was so sure that it was going to get in the way. You're not challenging the self-critical thoughts that get in the way of opening up. You're not practicing what it's like to just be yourself, to share how you feel and what's on your mind.

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And know that even with the people that you're closest to can still require vulnerability, right? You're not normalizing that it takes time to relax around people, even the people that you know and love. That is perfectly normal. It doesn't mean there's something wrong with you, or something's wrong with a relationship. And you're probably not very curious about others. You're probably not in that place of teaching your brain that, "Hey, you know what? Connection requires curiosity."

My brain was not curious about others. It thought it had a crystal ball, or that I was a mind reader. "I knew what they were thinking, and what they were thinking about me wasn't good." So, just notice that you're not practicing any of those skills. And that piece is actually what is going to get in the way.

Okay, so that was just a little sample today of how the think-feel-act cycle can work with The Connector. Again, this is just one example. I was giving you one thought, one feeling, one set of actions and inactions. It can show up differently for you.

But if you're one of those people that you know that The Connector Archetype is something that shows up in your relationship with alcohol, try and see what your think-feel-act cycle looks like. Really ask yourself, "What is my go-to thought when The Connector is activated? What am I thinking about how alcohol will help me with this feeling, with this connection? What bubbles up inside of me? How do I feel when I think that?"

And most importantly, beyond just reaching for a drink, beyond the action of 'okay, so then I said yes to a drink,' maybe think about, "What am I not doing? How am I not fostering connection? What kind of things am I not doing, that's not normalizing the situation? Not building the skill? Even with people I love. Sometimes it does feel a little vulnerable to just be myself. And that's normal."

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So, spend some time considering this, and it's going to show you where you need to focus your energy. Because if you want to do the work to unravel this archetype, you're not going to do it with willpower. This cannot just be about gritting your teeth. It has to really be about understanding the habit, and how it works from the deepest level.

That's the power of what the think-feel-act cycle can show you. Alright everybody, that's it for today. I will see you next week, and we will be talking about The reward Archetype. See you then.

Hey guys, you already know that drinking less has plenty of health benefits. But did you know that the work you do to change your relationship with alcohol will help you become more of the person you want to be in every part of your life?

Learning how to manage your brain and your cravings is an investment in your physical, emotional and personal wellbeing. And that's exactly what's waiting for you when you join my membership *Take a Break*. Whether you want to drink less, drink rarely, or not at all, we'll help you figure out a relationship with alcohol that works for you. We'll show you why rules, drink plans, and Dry January so often fail, and give you the tools you need to feel in control and trust yourself.

So, head on over to RachelHart.com and sign up today, because changing the habit is so much easier when you stop trying to go it alone.

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