

## Ep #387: The Reward: What the Brain Learns



### Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

**Rachel Hart**

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## Ep #387: The Reward: What the Brain Learns

You are listening to the *Take a Break* podcast with Rachel Hart, Episode 387.

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.

Alright, everybody, welcome back. So, I am doing a series right now all about the Drink Archetypes and what your brain learns when a certain archetype is activated. Now, if you're not familiar with the Drink Archetypes, these are the eight different types of drinking.

None of them are bad. None of them are problematic. It's really about just helping you get awareness about the habit and how it works, and what your brain thinks the drink represents. That's what the Archetypes is really helping give you insight into.

So if you don't know your Archetypes yet, if you haven't taken the free quiz, make sure you do that. Because having that information on the Archetypes that are most prevalent for you really will make a big difference when you try to do the work of changing your relationship with alcohol. You can take the free quiz at [DrinkType.com](http://DrinkType.com). It's really easy. You'll get your results, and it will really help you as you are listening to this series and digging into the Archetypes and how they might be showing up for you.

I'm going to be talking about The Reward archetype today. The Reward archetype is all about when the brain associates the drink with a treat for working hard. And it has a mindset trap that often shows up as, "This is my 'me time'," right?

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Maybe you're used to putting work or friends and family first, and you don't have that much time for yourself. Maybe you find it hard to disconnect from work, or to stop thinking about your to-do list, or working on your to-do list, or maybe it's just hard for you to be unproductive.

And so, what can happen is that the brain can start to associate the drink with a treat and with permission to stop working. And that's why you can get into this trap of feeling like the drink is your "me time". And when that happens, your ability to say no is not just about how much you can grit your teeth and your willpower, it's really about unraveling everything that your brain is learning with this Archetype.

So, that's what we're going to be really digging into today. Like I said, The Reward, it teaches the brain that the drink is permission, essentially, to stop working. And I just want to acknowledge that humankind has long used alcohol's intoxicating effects to help induce relaxation. That's not a bad thing, right? It's not bad to pour a drink because it's relaxing at the end of the day.

Just from listening to the podcast, none of this is about labeling your behavior as "good" or "bad" or "right" or "wrong". It's about understanding that when the drink becomes your go-to way to relieve stress, and when your brain associates it with the archetype The Reward, and sees that as kind of "me time" or permission to stop working, or the way that you stop thinking about work, what will happen is that it will actually create a rebound effect for you.

One of the pieces that I have found so transformative in my own work is to really understand the think-feel-act cycle and the idea that you're drinking doesn't just happen, right? You don't reach for the drink without something unfolding in your mind first, without having a thought and a feeling. And so, what I really want to take you through today is understanding what that thought and feeling is teaching your brain.

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Again, The Reward can show up in so many different ways. Sometimes, it's happening because maybe you find, if you're like me in life right now, in the point that I am in my life... I have two little kids. I have a two-year-old and a six-year-old... I find that evenings and weekends are more exhausting than restful. So, maybe that's coming up for you.

The Reward can also show up because you are used to following strict diet or exercise plans, and drinking is part of what you do on cheat days. A drink may be something that you use to kind of power through a task that you don't want to do, or to tackle something that you've been avoiding. All of that is to say, it can show up in a lot of different ways.

But I think one of the most common ways that I see it show up with The Reward is that you start out from a place of just feeling physically or emotionally drained, or both. And so, you're starting from that place. And what so many people will have is the thought, "I deserve a drink. I deserve a drink."

I've done a whole podcast episodes about this thought, "I deserve a drink," so we're not going to go too deep into the thought today. I just want you to really understand what unfolds from there. You have that thought, "I deserve a drink," and it sparks that little bit of desire, that little bit of, "Maybe I should stop by the liquor store on my way home. Maybe I should go to the kitchen and open up a bottle of wine, because I deserve it."

So, what happens? I mean, our feelings, they motivate us to take action. When you tell yourself that you deserve a drink, and you feel that little bit of desire, and then what do you do? You go get the drink, right? Especially if you're just on autopilot, right? If you're not yet in that place of trying to change the habit, or trying to change your relationship with alcohol.

One of the things that I have really been digging into in this series is to look not just that the action of drinking, but also to notice the inactions. What are

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the inactions connected with this think-feel-act cycle? There are a couple inactions that I often see happening with The Reward and that are very connected to this thought, “I deserve a drink.” Again, The Reward can show up with a whole lot of different thoughts, this is not the only thought, right?

For this example we're going to be working with, “I deserve a drink.” So, you have that bit of desire. You reach for the drink to help you relax. What are you *not* doing? One of the most important things that you're not doing, you're not normalizing physical and emotional ups and downs. Just normalizing that that is part of life. That the human experience is one of never-ending peaks and valleys.

I see this so often when I work with people. When you fail to normalize dips in your mood, or dips in your energy, it actually can turn into this quest for constant stimulation. And so, this is a big piece that I often just work with people on. Can we just start from the place of examining your physical and emotional exhaustion? Or feeling drained from a place of non-judgment? From a place of ‘nothing has gone wrong’?

You're not supposed to be productive and have tons of energy all the time. I will tell you, this was a really challenging thing for me to wrap my brain around. Because I really resisted those moments when I would run out of energy. It was so important to me, for a whole host of other reasons, to be as productive as possible, that that felt very uncomfortable just to normalize. That it's okay, it's okay to have dips in mood and dips in energy.

Or if I tell myself it's not okay, I will start following this quest for constant stimulation, which has a whole host of problems that comes along with you doing that. So, that's the first thing you're not doing.

You're also probably not prioritizing your wellbeing or setting boundaries. This comes up a lot with The Reward. So many people, when we work on this Archetype together, what they will say is, “Yeah, but I really do deserve

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it. And I deserve it because I'm always doing everything for everyone else. My needs always come last." A lot of people will fall into that trap.

They're just giving and giving and giving and giving. And there's only so much we can give, right? We only have so much capacity. And you get to a point, if all you're doing is giving all day long, then yeah, you're going to kind of run into a brick wall. Where it's like, "No, no, no, I deserve some 'me time'." So, this is a really important piece when you're working with trying to change your relationship with alcohol, and The Reward archetype is activated for you.

Part of your ability to drink less, or to say no, is connected to your ability to set healthy boundaries, right? Otherwise, you will be stuck in this cycle of over committing and overworking, and constantly saying yes at your own expense. It's very hard to manage your cravings from that place. So, not prioritizing your wellbeing, not setting boundaries, those are also problems that I see a lot.

You may also be ignoring signs that you need to rest. Like I said before, the body was not designed to be productive every waking moment. But I will tell you this, it is really hard to rest or even enjoy your downtime if you keep telling yourself, "I haven't done enough. I could be doing more." So, not only paying attention to the signs that you need to rest, but making it okay. "You know what? It's okay to be unproductive."

So many people will tell me, "I'm trying to drink less, but if I don't have that drink, and I'm just kind of sitting there trying to 'relax,' I don't feel relaxed. Because my brain is just in this place of 'you could be doing more. What about all the things that we didn't get done today?'" So, that's an important component that you have to work on.

That really comes with the work that you do to start to manage your mind, and to challenge your thoughts, and create new thought patterns in your

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brain. Thinking new thoughts around, “Why do you need to be productive all of the time? Why is that essential?”

This is a big topic that comes up all the time inside the membership, that people work on, to really see that something that on the surface that sounds so great, like, “Yeah, I just love to get stuff done,” it actually can set them up to fail when it comes to having a healthier relationship with alcohol.

And finally, one of the things that you're probably not doing... You reach for the drink, right? But you're probably not doing this. You're probably not finding ways to make your life more sustainable. Whether that means doing less, or letting go of unrealistic expectations, or asking for help. I mean, it can mean a whole host of different things.

But if you want to really break free of this Archetype, you have to do the work of also figuring out, “Hey, what's unsustainable in my life right now? Am I going to keep trying to ignore that and push that to the side, pretend that I'll deal with it later, constantly feel exhausted and overcommitted and overworked and too restricted, and then try to make up with it for a drink? Or am I actually going to tackle those things?”

That's a lot, right? That's a lot of stuff happening in that “action line”. We have the action of drinking to help you relax, but then we have to notice all the things that you're not doing. And so, here's the thing. The think-feel-act cycle is always creating a result, right? It's always teaching our brain something, and we learn something in the short term, right? In the short term, yes, alcohol has the ability to help you feel relaxed.

But in the long term, what happens with The Reward archetype? In the long term, alcohol allows you to keep deprioritizing your needs and it creates this rebound effect that will increase your stress levels. And I want to explain a little bit about why that happens. Most people know already, that alcohol has the ability to make you feel more relaxed, right?

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It creates this feeling of calm by binding with your GABA receptors, and by doing that, it can block signals that are associated with stress and anxiety and fear. It inhibits glutamate in the brain. And it just overall kind of decreases activity in the central nervous system. So, all of these things together, really act on you to create that relaxed feeling.

But here's the thing. When alcohol wears off, the brain is going to try to restore its original chemical balance. The brain always wants to do this, it always wants to go back to homeostasis, right? And in order to do that here, it's then going to reduce GABA and increase glutamate. And what can happen is that this can actually increase feelings of anxiety the next day.

I've talked about this on the podcast before. There's this idea of not just a hangover, but hang-xiety, right? This idea that you wake up the day after drinking feeling more anxious. This is part of the rebound effect. Now, I will tell you from having worked with thousands of people, and having taken through thousands of people through the 30-Day Challenge, so many people have no awareness that they have this increased anxiety until they do the work of temporarily removing alcohol from their life.

So many people will wake up and say, after a couple of days or a week or two, "Oh, I feel a lot less anxious when my eyes open in the morning." But it's this kind of low-level of hum of anxiety, that for many people, they don't even realize is there until they remove alcohol. That's why doing a 30-Day Challenge can be so incredibly powerful, right?

Especially when you do it outside of the context of Dry January. It's not just about, "Okay, I've just got to prove that I can make it for a month." It's not just about counting days. It's really about, "Alright, if I can just do a little experiment here and practice these tools, but also get some data on what is it like for me. What changes do I notice?" This one is a huge change for so many people.

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So, it creates this rebound effect, essentially, because your brain is just trying to go back to homeostasis. But I will tell you this, the more you use alcohol as a way to relax, the less time you spend developing sustainable coping mechanisms. Sustainable coping mechanisms like thought work, or mindfulness or somatic practices, or breathing exercises, that don't create this rebound effect.

There are a lot of tools out there that we can use to help manage our stress, and help calm us down, that are not going to create the rebound effect the next day. But when we get in the habit of using alcohol as a way to relax, we spend less time really investigating and practicing those types of exercises.

Now, here's the other thing that happens. Over time, you may start to believe, whether consciously or unconsciously, that alcohol is the only thing that actually helps you relax. And if the experience of being physically and emotionally drained is not a once in a while thing, if it's a more kind of chronic feeling in your life, guess what's going to happen?

If you start believing that alcohol is the only thing that helps you relax, and you're having kind of chronic exhaustion, or physical or emotional stress; that that's kind of with you most days; what's going to happen is you're likely going to start drinking more frequently. This is why The Reward is so often, not always, but very often, connected to more daily drinking.

Because you're drinking more frequently, in part because you have this feeling of being chronically physically and emotionally drained. But now, here's the thing. The more you drink, the more likely you are to develop a tolerance to alcohol, right? A tolerance is really just your brain's attempt to maintain balance.

So, it's not just the day after, but the more that we are drinking, the more that the brain is like, "Okay, I'm being repeatedly overstimulated, I've got to

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do something about this.” The brain does not want to be repeatedly overstimulated all the time. So, once a tolerance is developed, what happens? You need to drink more to produce the same effect. In other words, it will take more alcohol to replicate the good feeling that you used to get from a single glass.

And because of this, you may find yourself drinking more in a sitting. I cannot tell you the number of people that I work with who will say, “I don't understand what happened. Drinking just started to creep up out of nowhere.” Not realizing that what was going on was they were developing a tolerance. They were continually going back for more, but not even fully conscious of why they were doing it. In part because they needed more to get the same relaxation effect.

And when this happens, you can very easily feel like you're stuck in a catch-22. If you don't drink, your brain is just stressed, right? It's not getting The Reward it expects, on top of the physical and emotional exhaustion that you feel. And then, if you try to reduce how much you drink, you're unlikely to achieve the relaxing effect that you seek. So, the brain can use both of these outcomes, right?

Both of these outcomes are kind of “proof” that you need a drink to relax. When in reality, alcohol is creating a rebound effect that is adding more stress to your life. Meanwhile, you haven't addressed the root cause of your physical or emotional exhaustion. You aren't setting healthy boundaries. You're not giving yourself permission to rest.

As a result, you keep believing this thought, “I deserve a drink.” You keep reinforcing The Reward archetype. When in reality, alcohol is making it easier to ignore the things that you truly do deserve in life. Things like prioritizing your needs, and prioritizing your wellbeing, and no longer saying that everything related to you has to go on the back burner.

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So, if you want to drink less, if you want to stop drinking, if you just want to have a healthier relationship with alcohol, you will see, if The Reward archetype is there, you have to do more than just say no to your cravings. This cannot just be about willpower. You have to really understand how the treat, the treat that you think alcohol is, how that is helping you tolerate something that isn't working.

And I will just say, when I say those words “tolerate something that isn't working,” that can freak some people out, right? That does not mean that there's something massively wrong with your life. It does not mean that you have to make these huge changes. Sometimes it's as simple as letting go of all the “shoulds” and “musts” and “have-tos” that punctuate your day.

Sometimes it's sitting down and just really asking yourself, really reevaluating, “Why is it okay for everyone's needs to take priority over mine?” Sometimes it's about practicing getting better at saying no, or practicing asking for help. Or starting to tell yourself, “You know what? You don't have to do it all.”

You may need to examine your relationship with productivity, or your relationship with your to-do list. You may need to reexamine that thought, “I just have to finish up a couple more things, and then I'll stop working.” I have had to do so much work on that thought myself, in my own life. But you have to do more than just saying no, right?

Because if you just try to say no, if you just try to use brute force and willpower, and you're not working on The Reward archetype at the same time, what will happen is you will be caught in this tug-of-war. Because you're not actually addressing this piece that your brain has unconsciously learned about what the drink represents. And if you're not addressing that, you will feel stuck.

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Okay, so that's a little sample today of how the think-feel-act cycle works with The Reward. I will be talking about The Escape next time, which is all about using alcohol as a way to forget what's bothering you. And over the next couple of weeks, I'll be going through the rest of the eight archetypes.

But for those of you who know that you have The Reward archetype, or you suspect that it may be one of the archetypes that shows up for you, try seeing what your think-feel-act cycle looks like. Try really figuring out what is that go-to thought for you. Is that pouring the drink is part of “me time” or it's part of a cheat day. What is your go-to thought? Maybe it's, “I deserve it”. Maybe it's something else. Ask yourself what feeling bubbles up for you.

And then, most importantly, beyond just noticing the action of reaching for a drink, ask yourself, “What am I not doing? What actions aren't I taking that maybe would be helpful in this situation?” Spend some time considering this, and it will show you the best place to focus your energy if you want to change.

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

Hey guys, you already know that drinking less has plenty of health benefits. But did 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.

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