

Ep #388: The Escape: 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 388.

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, everybody, welcome to another episode all about The Drink Archetypes™ and what your brain learns. We're talking about The Escape archetype today. We're going to do a deep dive into really understanding this archetype, and really understanding how it impacts your relationship with alcohol.

I've been doing a whole series all about The Drink Archetypes, all about what the brain is learning with each archetype. So, if you haven't listened to the previous ones, go back and check those out. Also, if you're not familiar with The Drink Archetypes, if you don't know what your Drink Archetypes are, then you really need to check out my free quiz at DrinkType.com.

You can take the quiz, and you can find out which of the eight different types of drinking shows up in your relationship with alcohol. It's such important information to have because it really gives you the blueprint for lasting change.

So, what I'm going to do during today's episode is really do a deep dive into The Escape, help you see how it connects to the think-feel-act cycle, and what your brain is learning every time you drink because of The Escape archetype. Now, The Escape is all about using alcohol as a way to forget what's bothering you. It's a way to kind of quiet your chattering mind, or to stop worrying, or to numb certain negative emotions.

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This archetype can appear in lots and lots of different places. But for a lot of people, it shows up for them when they really feel kind of besieged by certain emotions, or they have unexpected life events happen. It tends to show up when you're feeling overwhelmed by your responsibilities.

Maybe if you're unable to shake worries about the future. You might be dealing with family or relationship struggles and conflict. You might feel consumed by what's happening in the news or politics or world events. Or you might be coping with grief or loss or trauma.

That said, I was coaching someone recently inside the membership, and he was saying when he started doing this work, when he took The Drink Archetypes quiz, the archetype that he most resonated with was The Upgrade archetype, which is all about using alcohol to elevate your experiences.

He was saying, "The more that I'm working with you and using these tools, and the more that I'm kind of understanding this, I think that The Escape might be showing up for me as well." One of the things that I said to him was, "It's not like we only have one or two archetypes that appear for us. Different situations in our life and different times, different archetypes can appear." So, that's really normal.

The other thing that I said is, "The Escape is one of the archetypes that can sound kind of heavy, right? Because a lot of times it does show up when there are really strong emotions, or people are going through challenging periods. But it can also show up when it feels like 'I don't feel like I have all of this negative emotion. But the negative emotion that is there, I don't really want to be present with it. I don't really want to feel it'."

So, all of that is to say that The Escape can show up in a lot of different ways. But when it shows up for you, when it's activated, saying no to a drink, it will interfere with your desire to just avoid how you're feeling. And

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that will make it hard to keep your commitment. That will make it hard to abstain or moderate.

I do find with The Escape that the mindset trap so often is, “I just need to get through this. Whatever's happening in my life, I just need to get through this period. And then, I'm going to pay attention to my drinking. Then I'm going to cut back. Then I'm going to do a Dry January.” But the more you rely on a drink to cope, the less resilient you start to feel with your emotions.

And in fact, not only do you feel less resilient, but your brain starts to really believe that whatever is happening in your life is kind of too much for you. So, this is an important thing to really understand, how think-feel-act cycle works with The Escape. Remember, I talk about think-feel-act cycle all the time in the podcast. If you're not familiar, it's not a concept that I came up with.

It's the idea which philosophers have been talking about for thousands of years. The idea that our actions don't just happen. They're connected to what's unfolding in our mind. We can look at our thoughts and our feelings to start to understand our behaviors. And this is a really powerful framework to have if you want to start to change a habit.

So often, we try to change a habit just by focusing on the action, and what the think-feel-act cycle has us do is kind of zoom out, right? Instead of just, focusing on, “Okay, I've just got to say no to the drink. I've just got to say no. I've got to grit my teeth and use willpower.” It has us start to really look back and understand, “Hey, but why am I saying yes? What's actually going on there?”

I think that Drink Archetypes are kind of the next level of that, right? Because it's starting to show you these bigger patterns that may be showing up for you in your relationship with alcohol.

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So, The Escape is really teaching the brain that certain emotions need a drink. And I will just say, humans have long used alcohol to drown sorrows, or to temporarily forget about upsetting events. But you know when that turns into a habit? When we repeatedly turn to alcohol to deal with overwhelming emotions. We repeatedly pour a drink because it's like, "I don't want to think anymore. I just don't want to feel this way anymore."

You will end up feeling less resilient. You will end up feeling like you're less capable of seeing yourself through life's challenges. And that will actually make it harder for you to change the habit. So, I'm going to walk you through an example of some of the thoughts, feelings and actions that then teach the brain, essentially, this idea that's connected with The Escape.

The idea that certain emotions really need a drink, or that "I have to find a way to forget what is bothering me." So, I'm going to give you an example here. Again, this is just one thought. This is one example of how it could show up. There are a lot of thoughts that can be connected to The Escape. But I want you to see how the think-feel-act cycle works, so that you can really get a handle on what the brain is learning.

For this example, I'm just going to use the thought, "I need a drink." Now, I will tell you this, you can have this thought and it can be connected to different archetypes, but I'm going to use it here in terms of The Escape. "I need a drink. I just need a drink right now."

So, you have that thought; you may be consciously aware of it. It may be happening at an unconscious level, but the thought is there. It sparks a little bit of desire. And part of what happens next is you reach for a drink in order to get relief. That's the action piece.

But one of the things that I've really been unpacking during this series on the podcast, is to really pay attention to not just what you're doing, not just "Okay, so then I reached for a drink. I reached for another," but to notice

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what you're *not* doing. This is a big piece of the think-feel-act cycle that a lot of people miss. I missed this at first, too. I wasn't paying attention to, what am I not doing?

And so, I see kind of three key *inactions* show up with The Escape. I'm reaching for a drink to feel better, because I'm telling myself that I need a drink, and I'm feeling that little spark of desire. But here's what I'm *not* doing. First, I'm not normalizing negative emotions. This is a huge thing that I work on with people. This is a huge thing that I have worked on with myself for years, it has transformed my life and is part of what was essential to transforming my relationship with alcohol.

I will tell you this, emotions, like grief and fear and anger and despair and hopelessness, all the kinds of big, bad, negative emotions are like, "Ick, I don't want to feel that," they are unavoidable. Right? When you are having the human experience, the human experience includes some of these negative emotions. We're just like, "No, thank you."

But when we don't normalize them... And by normalize them, I mean nothing has gone wrong. Right? It's not a sign that something has gone wrong. It doesn't mean that I'm doing something wrong. It's simply part of what it is like to be human.

"Sometimes, in this human experience, I will feel grief. Sometimes, in this human experience, I will be afraid. I will be angry. I will feel hopeless." That little bit of normalizing can do so much. But when you fail to normalize what is happening, when you always really relate to your negative emotions as if they are a problem, the more fearful you will become when they appear.

So, notice that and just ask yourself, "Do I ever stop to normalize my negative emotions?" I will tell you, I spent most of my life not doing that. I spent most of my life being like, "Oh God, here we go again. I don't want to

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feel like this. I feel like this too much, and I need to get away from it.” So, that's one thing that you're probably not doing.

With The Escape archetype, you're also probably not creating safety with these emotions. Now, this can almost feel counterintuitive, the idea that you can be safe with these negative emotions. That not only you do not like, but you may actually be fearful when they appear. But again, this is a big piece.

I talk about this exact same work with the work that we do with cravings, to normalize that you're having a craving, and also to create safety with the craving. Because if we're always afraid of it, then it's always going to be the enemy. That work of naming and normalizing, we can bring to our emotions as well. Even the emotions that you don't like. Even the emotions that most do not want to experience.

No matter what that emotion is, your body was designed to feel it. It was designed to process it. It was designed to resolve it on its own; every single human emotion. Every single one of them, the body was designed to feel, process and resolve on its own. It didn't need alcohol. It didn't need food, right? It doesn't need anything. And I think that is huge. That is a huge thing.

For me, this is something that I use in my life all the time. It's like, “Okay, I woke up on a given day, and I'm feeling a lot of fear. It wouldn't be the emotion that I would choose, but here it is. Nothing's gone wrong. I guess today is one of those days, right? Where I'm going to have the human experience of fear. I can be safe with it. My body was actually designed to feel and process and resolve fear.” So, creating safety is a huge thing, especially with The Escape archetype.

Finally, you are probably not challenging the thoughts that are all about catastrophizing, all-or-nothing thinking, black-and-white thinking; so much additional suffering. When we're experiencing our negative emotions, we

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have so much additional suffering caused by these unconscious thought patterns that really tend towards extreme.

So, thought patterns like, "I can't handle this. What if X happens? I'm never going to feel better. Everything is ruined." I mean, you know what this sounds like? I am always reminding people that I work with, we can do so much to manage our mind. We can do so much to shift our thoughts, and to challenge them, and question them, and practice more helpful, believable, supportive, compassionate thoughts.

But you're never going to get to the point, nor should you want to get to the point, where it's like, "Every thought is 100% amazing and grateful and thankful and supportive, and wonderful. And so, I never have to experience a negative emotion." It doesn't work like that. Right? I use the analogy a lot of, "You're not going to be able to delete the negative emotions, but you definitely can turn down the volume."

And the way that you turn down the intensity and the volume is by working on the catastrophizing, and the all-or-nothing and the black-and-white thinking. Many times, that's not happening, right? When you tell yourself you need a drink, and you have that spark of desire, and then you go get the drink in order to feel relief, you're not normalizing the negative emotion. You're not creating safety. And you're definitely not challenging the thought patterns that are creating additional suffering.

So, that's like the think-feel-act cycle, right? That's kind of like the foundation of the habit. Because you can imagine how, if you practice that over and over and over again, your brain starts to have this neural pathway about, "Oh, I guess this is what I do when I keep returning to painful thoughts or painful emotions. I have this thought, I have this feeling, and these are the actions that I take. And these are all the actions that I don't take."

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But let's talk about the result. Because every think-feel-act cycle creates something, right? It creates a result. A lot of times, when I start teaching this tool to people, they will say, "Oh, well, the result is that I drink too much. The result is that I numbed how I was feeling." But I always want to have people take it a step further and ask themselves, "What did my brain learn?"

I like to think about the result in both kind of a short-term and a long-term result. And so, yes, short term. Maybe you polished off the bottle of wine, and because you did that, that alcohol that you drank, it temporarily numbed your mind and your body, so you were less present with those negative emotions that you didn't want to feel. That's the short-term result,

What's the long-term result? What is the brain learning? The long-term result with The Escape is that you feel less resilient. You doubt your ability to see yourself through challenging times. I want to explain why that happens.

So first, let's just talk about the numbing piece. Alcohol, it slows down activity in the central nervous system. You drink enough, and it will make you think and speak and move slower. This sedative effect, it can feel like a dulling of your thoughts. It can feel like a dulling of your emotions and your senses. It can feel almost like you're disconnected from your mind or your body or environment.

That's how alcohol can start to really numb negative emotions, right? Because it's literally removing or slowing down the activity in the central nervous system and disconnecting you from your senses, really. But when you're drinking to escape painful thoughts and feelings, the first thing you need to remember is that a single serving of alcohol is unlikely to create the sense of numbness that you seek.

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So, when you're drinking to escape, one of the things that I'm always talking about with the people that I work with is, "Let's remember that that single serving, it's probably not going to do the trick, right? One glass probably isn't going to do the trick." You're starting out from a place where you are more likely to overdrink. Just that knowledge, in and of itself, can be so transformative. Right?

People will tell me all the time, "You know what, Rachel? Yesterday, I went into the kitchen and I got myself a drink. I looked at it and I was like, 'Is this really going to be enough to numb how I want to feel, or numb what I'm feeling?'" That awareness is so powerful.

I think it's also very powerful because sometimes our drinking can feel kind of mysterious. Like, "I don't know why I drink as much as I do. I don't know why sometimes," this is what I would tell myself, "I don't know why sometimes I know when to call it quits, and other times I go way overboard."

But when you understand which archetypes are activated, and you understand what's happening behind the scenes, you'll start to see from the get-go this is an instance where I may actually be really primed to overdrink. Because if I'm trying to escape how I feel, it's probably not going to happen with one glass, and probably not going to happen with two, I'm going to need more than that. So, that's what's happening.

That's how alcohol works to really slow down the activity in the central nervous system, and help you kind of remove yourself, or feel a dulling of these painful thoughts and emotions. But when you routinely avoid and distract or numb how you feel, what's going to happen is you're going to start to feel emotionally stuck.

Because if you're numbing the emotion over and over again, you're unable to move forward. You're unable to find closure. It's just still there the next

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day, it didn't go anywhere, right? And so, you will get in this place of just feeling kind of emotionally stuck. Okay? So, not only are you unable to find closure, but the more you are trying to use alcohol to escape how you're feeling, another thing is happening inside the brain.

Your brain is starting to associate negative thought patterns with getting a reward. Remember how I was talking about the thought patterns of catastrophizing, or all-or-nothing thinking and black-and-white thinking? All of the, "I can't handle it. What if this happens? I'm never going to feel better. Everything is ruined"?

Your brain starts to learn, "Hey, when I think this way, I get a reward. And remember, your lower brain is always trying to remember what are the things that lead to me getting rewarded. So, I like to think about it as the brain is now incentivized to have a good reason to catastrophize in the future, or to whip out black-and-white thinking, or an all-or-nothing thought in the future because it starts to learn, "Hmm, when I think this way I get rewarded."

That's a really, really powerful thing, to just create more awareness on that. We are unknowingly and unconsciously incentivizing the brain to want to think more of these negative thought patterns, more of these painful thought patterns. Because the lower brain's like, "Yeah, that's great. I get a reward."

Now, another thing that's happening is that you may become fearful of certain emotions. I talk about this a lot inside the membership. I talk about the idea that we kind of can layer emotions on top of each other. Another way to think of it is like, we can have an emotion and then we can trigger a nervous system response. Because we believe certain emotions are dangerous, right?

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So, what ends up happening is, yeah, you may be feeling grief. But if you also have the thought about your grief, “You know what? This is too much for me. I can't handle it,” you may be triggering a nervous system response. You may actually be adding a layer of fear or anxiety to the mix. You're making that underlying situation even less tolerable, because now it's like, “I'm not just dealing with grief. Now I'm dealing with the fear or the anxiety that I have about just feeling grief.”

All of this... I want you to start to see. Remember, one of the long-term results was feeling less resilient, doubting your ability to see yourself through life's challenging events. Well, this is how it's all playing out. Right? This is how that's happening.

Now, the other thing that happens is the more you drink, the more you increase the likelihood of developing a tolerance. Remember, if you're trying to escape how you feel, one serving probably isn't going to do it. And if you're drinking a lot to escape the feeling... Well, you haven't actually found any closure, it's going to be there again the next day.

And the more that you then keep turning to alcohol... keep opening up that bottle of wine or grabbing a six pack because it's like, “Well, yeah, but I need the drink. I don't want to feel this way. I can't handle feeling this way. I'm sick of feeling this way. I feel this way too much”... the more you increase the likelihood of developing a tolerance, which leads to drinking more.

All of this is kind of happening right underneath the surface. And when you are drinking more, what happens? Well, the more you drink, the more you put a physical and emotional toll on your body. So, you're likely to wake up feeling more anxious, feeling more down. Your brain is trying to return to homeostasis. You're maybe feeling physically depleted. You're probably not getting great sleep. And you end up getting stuck in a self-perpetuating cycle. Right?

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The more you try to escape with a drink, the worse you end up feeling physically and emotionally. Meanwhile, you're not learning healthy ways to cope with painful thoughts, or to process challenging emotions, or even to normalize them or to create safety in your body. Nor are you considering, and this is a big thing, you're not considering that you're much more capable than your thoughts would have you believe.

I think this is really true for everyone. If you take one thing away from this episode, it's the idea that if you look back on your life, and you think about the things that you have figured out, or accomplished or overcome, you probably can make a pretty long list. And then, think about what your brain told you about your ability.

When I have this list for myself, and I think about all the things that I figured out or accomplished or achieved or overcome in my life, and then I think about what my brain told me my capability was, these two things do not square, right? We are so much more capable than our brain would have us believe, or our thoughts would have us believe.

But until we really understand that, until we really have that recognition, we're not actually going to be able to meaningfully start to untangle and unravel everything that's happening with The Escape archetype. We will stay stuck in this place of believing the thought, "I need a drink."

We will reinforce the archetype, when in reality, what is alcohol truly doing with this archetype? It's preventing you from feeling resilient. It's adding a greater physical and emotional toll. It's making you fearful of certain emotions. It's reinforcing thought patterns that are so unhelpful because the brain's like, "It might be unhelpful to catastrophize, but the more you do it, the more I get a reward."

So, I want you, really, to think about all of this. Think about what the brain is learning. This piece is so key if you want to sustainably change your

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relationship with alcohol. And this is also why I'm always harping on the fact that we cannot rely on willpower and discipline and gritting our teeth in order to create the change that we want.

If you want to learn how to drink less or how to stop drinking or how to how have a healthy relationship with alcohol, and you have this archetype... in fact, if you have any archetype... you've got to do more than just saying no to your cravings. There's another piece of the puzzle here. Because there is the piece of what your brain has learned to see and believe that the drink represents.

Willpower is not going to get you where you want to go. Gritting your teeth, it's not going to get you where you want to go. And so, for all of you out there today, this was just a little peek into what the think-feel-act cycle can look like with The Escape. Of course, it can manifest in a lot of different ways. But if you think that The Escape archetype may be showing up for you, I would really encourage you get out a pen, get out a piece of paper, and just see if you can jot this down.

What is your go-to thought about drinking when you're like, "I just want to check out. I just want to stop thinking. I just want to stop worrying"? What do you think is that thought for you? What feeling comes up for you? And most importantly, what's happening in the Action line for you?

So, we know, "Okay, I'm reaching for a drink," But what else? Pay attention to the things you may not be doing, those inactions. Spend some time considering how this may be contributing to how much you are drinking. Spend some time considering about where you may need to spend your energy, and the skills that you need to build.

Because when you want to do this work, when you want to change the habit in the most lasting, meaningful way, we have to go to the root cause. And going to the root cause means working with the Archetypes. And

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working with the archetypes means we have to look beyond the idea that this is just a matter of saying no. We have to teach our brains something new, because it learned something completely outside of our conscious awareness.

That happens, it's not a problem. But once we see what it's learned, once we understand the associations our brain has made with the drink, what it thinks the drink represents, we have to start to then give the brain something new to associate. Something new to think about.

And maybe that's just starting from the place of, "You know what? I'm so much more capable than my thoughts would have me believe."

Alright, I will be back next week with another one of these episodes, and we will be talking all about The Mask Archetype. Until then. I will see you all next week.

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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