

Ep #389: The Mask: 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 389.

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 back. This is another episode in my series all about what your brain learns from drinking. So, we're exploring this by examining each of the eight different Drink Archetypes.

If you're not familiar with The Drink Archetypes™, they're really about helping you understand the different ways that we learn to use alcohol and the different types of drinking.

The Drink Archetypes are the bigger idea that people drink for very different reasons. Now, we really aren't taught to examine our drinking from the inside. We're taught to examine it from the outside. In other words, we are taught to focus on how much we are drinking.

That piece matters, of course. I mean, if you weren't drinking more than you wanted to, you wouldn't want to change your drinking. You wouldn't want to change your relationship with alcohol. So, the 'how much,' it still matters.

But we can't just focus on the external. We need to go on the inside and understand what's happening there. And that's what The Drink Archetypes help you do.

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They help you explore the why. Why you are drinking? Why you're saying yes to your cravings? Why you're going back for more? Why you have this desire? Why you have all the chatter? That 'why' is essential if you want to change the habit, whether that is drinking less or stopping, or just figuring out how to have a healthier relationship with alcohol.

And I will tell you this, I understood my drinking for the longest time on a very surface level. In fact, most people, I would say the vast majority of people that I work with come to me in that same place, right? They come with a very surface level understanding of their drinking. And for me, it sounded like, "I just like to drink. I always have. I like how it makes me feel. I like the taste."

And what I want you to know is that all of these explanations, they can be true. I'm not here to try to tell you that you're fooling yourself or you're lying to yourself. They can be true. But what I want you to get curious about, what I want you to understand is, what else? And what else is true beyond, "I like the taste. I like how it makes me feel"?

What else do you like about what the drink does for you? That answer is always going to be found inside a Drink Archetype. Now, I like to use the example of you have four people sitting around a table splitting a bottle of wine. Each person can have a glass of wine, but they all may be drinking for very different reasons, even though on the outside it looks like they're all doing the same thing.

So, one person might have The Upgrade Archetype activated. That's all about drinking to elevate a situation or make it special. Another person, they might have The Connector Archetype activated, which is about drinking as a way to bond or feel close to others.

A third person might have The Hourglass Archetype activated, which is more about drinking to pass the time. Maybe they're actually not enjoying

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who they're with or the company that they're in. And the last person, they could have maybe The Mask Archetype activated, which is about using a drink to quiet social anxiety or quiet your inner critic.

Again, on the surface it just looks like everyone is doing the exact same thing, they're all just drinking. But their desires and their motivations can be vastly different.

So, today we're going to talk about The Mask Archetype in depth and really explore what the brain learns from this archetype. Again, The Mask Archetype is all about the brain associating alcohol with feeling confident around others.

I will just add that none of the archetypes are associated with problematic drinking or a sign that something is wrong. They're really just a tool to help you gain awareness of what's happening beneath your conscious awareness, and also to help you understand what you need to focus on if you want to change.

Again, because we're taught to think about our drinking purely as a matter of willpower; the idea of if you want to cut back, if you want to stop drinking, you just need to have more willpower. You just need to grit your teeth. You just need to learn your lesson after a night of doing something stupid or drinking too much.

And of course, there is a role that willpower can play. There is a role that learning how to have more self-control can play. I'm not saying that isn't a piece of what we need, but unfortunately we talk about it as if that is the only piece. That's the "be all and the end all."

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There's a reason, when we're given that message that you just need more willpower, why so many people find that their ability to exercise willpower or use willpower can feel so hit or miss.

You might have periods like I did in my life, where I was actually pretty good at using willpower. I was able to go out and not always drink too much, but it wasn't reliable. Willpower wasn't reliable.

And so, many of you listening are in that same boat, where it feels like it works for a bit and then it stops working. And the reason why willpower isn't reliable is not because you are someone that lacks willpower, it's because willpower will never be able to address what your brain learns from drinking. And your brain is always learning from that drink.

So, before I dive into The Mask archetype and what your brain learns, if you don't know which of the eight archetypes apply to you... and you will find that multiple archetypes can apply depending on the situation... but if you don't know and you want to learn about this, go to DrinkType.com and you can take my free quiz.

You will get your results for your primary and your secondary archetypes, and where you fall with all eight archetypes as well.

But I will tell you this, I introduced these archetypes about six months ago, and I have just watched people get so much traction so much faster, with changing their relationship with alcohol, simply because the Drink Archetypes give them this kind of 'hidden piece of the puzzle' when it comes to habit change.

Okay, so let's talk about The Mask and what your brain learns with this archetype. Again, The Mask Archetype is all about drinking to help quiet your anxiety or forget your insecurities, so that you can just enjoy

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socializing and you can enjoy being around people. It will commonly appear in unfamiliar social settings, especially if you feel a lot of pressure to make a good impression.

But you know what? It can also appear in very familiar situations, when you are spending time with people that you actually know very well. The Mask, what I have seen, it tends to show up when you're meeting, trying to meet new people or make new friends.

Maybe you're dating or you're newly single. Maybe you have a lot of obligations either in your personal life or your work life to socialize or entertain or to network. It also tends to show up if you have a perception that the people around you are more accomplished, more worldly, smarter, funnier; whatever your version of 'compare and despair' sounds like.

Now, when The Mask is activated, what will happen is, in saying no to the drink, it interferes with your desire not only to feel confident, but to enjoy yourself in the social situation. And that will actually make it harder for you to moderate or abstain. Because it is a very normal and natural desire to want to feel confident and want to enjoy socializing with people.

It also tends to have a mindset trap. And I'm not going to go too much into the mindset trap, but I will tell you this, what I see appear a lot with this archetype is the thought, "Well, if I'm not going to drink, I'd rather not go." This mindset trap... and when we go through what your brain learns you're really going to understand how this mindset trap keeps you so stuck and makes it difficult for you to change the habit.

Now, I will tell you this. Remember, one of the things that I talk about on this podcast is that your drinking doesn't just happen. And even though it can sometimes feel this way, it certainly felt that way sometimes to me, your body doesn't make a move towards the drink without something unfolding in your mind first.

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This is the premise of the think-feel-act cycle, right? The idea that our actions don't just spontaneously happen, they are connected to our thoughts and our feelings. And understanding the think-feel-act cycle is really one of the cornerstones of my approach. It's what I've been talking about on the podcast since I launched it in the very beginning.

But I will tell you, The Drink Archetypes really take this to the next level. Because The Drink Archetypes get to the heart of that think-feel-act cycle faster, right? Many times, what will happen is people will say, "I'm not really sure what I'm thinking. I'm not really even sure what I'm feeling." And this coincides with the idea that sometimes it can feel like your drinking just happens to you.

So, The Drink Archetypes will help you reveal that unconscious part of the habit that can be hard to spot. The think-feel-act cycle also gets you out of the mindset of, "Once I start, I can't stop. I don't know why I drank that much. I don't know why I can't make good decisions."

I will tell you this, I had all of those thoughts for the longest time. And again, they all may feel very true, but I promise, these thoughts, "Once I start, I can't stop. I don't know why I drank that much. I don't know why I can't make good decisions. I don't know what happened," I promise you that they are blocking your ability to change.

And that's the beauty of working with a think-feel-act cycle, because it will help you get out of these thoughts very quickly.

I will just add this, when you're stuck in that confusion, and kind of not knowing why you drank as much as you did, or not knowing why it was hard for you to access your willpower, not understanding why it's hard for you to follow your plan, what will happen is that you will feel a lot of shame and hopelessness about your drinking. Two things which make it a lot harder to change.

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So, really focusing on the think-feel-act cycle, even if right now you're like, "I might be the one person that it doesn't apply to. I really don't think there's a thought or a feeling there," really committing to focusing on that will help you pinpoint the real reason that you are saying yes to your cravings.

And I promise you that reason has nothing to do with there being something wrong with you or something wrong with your brain. It really is about understanding what your brain has learned from drinking.

I will tell you this, one of the reasons why I think this approach is so powerful is that when you start understanding your drinking as a learned behavior, rather than a defective character or a sign that something is wrong with you or wrong with your brain, when you look at it as a learned behavior, all of a sudden you are on a much more empowering path to figure out how to change.

So, I'm going to walk you through an example of the think-feel-act cycle with The Mask Archetype so that you can really understand what the brain learns. I just want you to imagine going into a social setting and feeling a little uncomfortable; whatever that may look like for you.

For some people, that may be that you're really in your head. For other people, it may be you feel just a lot of discomfort in your body. But I want you to imagine going into a social situation feeling a little bit uncomfortable and having the thought, "A drink will help me loosen up and get out of my head."

Now, mind you, this is just one example of a potential thought that you could have with The Mask Archetype. It's not the only one, but we're going to work with that thought, "A drink will help me loosen up and get me out of my head."

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So, when you think that thought, that thought is, “Ooh, there's a solution here for me. There's a way out of this.” That thought is going to create the feeling of desire, right? And that desire, that's why you're reaching for the drink hoping that the alcohol is going to help you feel less insecure, help you get out of your head, help you start to enjoy the social situation.

A lot of times, when we think about the think-feel-act cycle, so often the mistake that I see is that we want to focus just on the action of drinking, right? So, you reach for the drink and then you reach for another, and it's all about the action of drinking.

But I want you to notice what you're *not* doing. What actions aren't you taking? Because the think-feel-act cycle helps you identify both your actions *and* your inactions, what you're not doing. And when it comes to The Mask, there are three inactions that I see come up all of the time.

The first thing is you're probably not practicing compassion with yourself. In that moment when you're feeling that uncomfortable, right? When you're around other people and you've got a lot of chatter in your head, or you just feel discomfort in your body, you're probably not practicing compassion towards yourself.

A lot of people will actually find they're doing the exact opposite, right? They are shaming themselves. I hear this a lot. People will say, “I'm just too old to care what people think about me. I should be over this by now.”

We have this idea that having anxiety in social situations is a young thing. It's something for the young people and there's a point at which we should just naturally grow out of it. And if we don't grow out of it, well, then we're doing something wrong.

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Now, keep in mind, when you're shaming yourself for how you're feeling, you're already feeling the discomfort, and then you're shaming yourself for feeling the discomfort, because you believe you're too old to feel this way or to care what people think, right? You are kind of just, I don't know, adding insult to injury in that situation.

So, you're probably not practicing a lot of compassion for yourself. You're also probably not viewing insecurity as a shared experience. I want you to hear me say that — Insecurity as a shared experience. Everyone, even the most confident of people, sometimes feel insecure.

When we have that Mask Archetype activated, it kind of creates this tunnel vision where it really feels like we're the only person, right? We're the only person that is feeling this uncomfortable or this anxious or this insecure. We fail to consider that someone else in the room may be in the exact same experience that you're having as well.

And that, I will tell you, I did a lot of work in my own relationship with alcohol around The Mask archetype. This piece, just considering that this could potentially be a shared experience. That maybe I was not the only one. That alone, that thought alone could give me so much relief.

And then, finally, you're not challenging your 'compare and despair' thought patterns. Remember when I said that The Mask has a tendency to show up when you have a thought like, "Well, everyone here is so much smarter or more worldly or funnier or more attractive," or whatever it is?

When you have those kind of 'compare and despair' thought patterns, instead of identifying them and questioning them and reframing these self-critical thoughts, what are we doing? We're just accepting them as facts, right? We're not challenging them. We're like, "No, this is just the truth. And that's why I feel insecure, so I should just have a drink."

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Notice what's happening in that action line. Yes, you're reaching for a drink because you have this belief that it will help you loosen up and get out of your head. But there are all of these things that you're not doing, as well.

And sometimes identifying what you're not doing is actually more powerful, more helpful than just focusing on, "Okay, well, I drank. I gave into a craving." What's not happening here? That's a piece of the puzzle that needs your attention. So, let's talk about what happens next.

The think-feel-act cycle, the brain is always learning from it, right? Because invariably, this is something that we are going to repeat over and over again. So, what is the brain learning? Short-term, the brain may learn, 'yeah, alcohol makes me feel temporarily confident around other people.' So, that's possible.

What's happening in the long-term? What I want to suggest to you is that long-term, what's happening is that your anxiety in social situations is actually growing. And I want to explain why that happens. So, let's back up for a second and just understand how alcohol really works.

Alcohol is able to slow down activity in your cerebral cortex. So, when you slow down activity in that part of your brain, you're going to have less access to your self-critical thoughts or your fears about what other people think. And when you have less access to these types of thoughts, you will temporarily appear more confident.

But again, alcohol does nothing to change those underlying self-critical thoughts. They're going to continue to show right back up the next time that the side effects of alcohol wears off. So, alcohol has done nothing to actually change this piece.

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And because you don't have a lot of tools to manage self-critical thoughts... most of us aren't given many tools for this... what will happen is over time, you may start to believe, whether consciously or unconsciously, that alcohol is necessary to feel confident in social situations.

Because it's like, "Well, how else am I going to stop thinking these thoughts? The only thing that seems to work is when I have a drink." Not realizing that the alcohol is working simply because it's slowing activity down to that part of your brain where you have access to the self-critical thoughts. Access to the fears of what people may think about you. Which, of course, we always assume is negative.

So, we start to kind of develop this pattern of, "Oh, so I need the drink to feel confident in social situations, because what else am I supposed to do?"

Now, here's the thing. The more you believe that alcohol is necessary in social situations, the more anxious you're going to feel without it. Because of course it's like, "Well, okay, so either I can have a drink and use that to loosen up, or I can just be like me and my thoughts. That's no fun."

So, we're just starting to develop more anxiety, because now it's like, 'I'm not going to have the thing that I believe I need to have in order to feel the confidence that I want to feel.' And all of this will contribute to over-drinking.

I want you to think about how this can happen with The Mask Archetype. You may start drinking early to take the edge off before seeing people. For me, this would often look like I would be getting ready to go out and be like, "Okay, well, I mean, I'm going to be drinking anyway, and I might as well have a drink while I'm at home."

I really didn't have the conscious awareness of why I was doing that, but truly, a lot of my self-critical thoughts would really ramp up when I was

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getting ready to go out. And so, I was unconsciously kind of trying to cope with 'I want to enjoy myself. I want to have a good time. I don't want to be all up in my head. I don't want to feel insecure.' And so, I would often start having that first drink before I even got there.

Or some of you may find that you may rush your first couple of drinks, right? So, you get to a social situation, and you get that initial 'I feel a little awkward. I feel a little uncomfortable.' And so, you may kind of rush those first couple of drinks because you're kind of desperate to get out of that discomfort.

So, even though your self-critical thoughts don't feel good, I mean, we don't like thinking them, we don't like dwelling in the place of our insecurities, what I want you to consider is that, in a way, your brain is actually incentivized to keep them. Your brain is incentivized to keep these self-critical thoughts even though they don't feel good because the more you judge yourself, the more likely you are to drink.

This kind of goes into everything that I talk about with the higher brain and the lower brain and understanding that the lower brain is really just focused on getting a reward. What do I need to do to get the reward? And when you start to understand that your brain is learning, "Oh, I think a negative thought about myself in the social situation, and I get a reward from a drink," right?

There's this perverse incentivization to keep this thought. You're not consciously doing this, but part of your brain is like, "When I have this negative thought, when I feel this negative feeling, guess what? I get a reward. Huh, rewards are good. Maybe I should keep that."

Now, finally, your tendency to be self-critical of yourself. Guess what's going to happen? It's going to migrate to your choices around alcohol. This is something that happens so often with The Mask. We already kind of go

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in, we already have the insecure thoughts before we ever start drinking, right?

We're very good at being self-critical or judgmental, or having that inner critic that's just always wanting to tell us what we're doing wrong or how we're not measuring up. So, that's already there. And then, well, once we start drinking, once we start discovering that there are parts of the habit that we don't like, that inner critic, those self-critical thoughts migrate to our choices around alcohol.

Think about all the times that you may have thought, "Oh God, what will people think if I don't drink tonight? What will people think if I stop after two?" Or the next morning when you've sobered up immediately assuming that your behavior was stupid or embarrassing. It's just that inner critic. It's just migrating to find other things to be critical about.

Now, meanwhile, the root cause of your insecurity, your negative thoughts about yourself, that all remains unchanged, right? And as these thoughts become more entrenched, your anxiety only grows. As a result, you're going to keep believing the thought, "That a drink will help me loosen up and get out of my head."

You're going to keep reinforcing The Mask Archetype when, in reality, alcohol is allowing your insecurities to fester and grow. This is what's happening. This is what your brain is learning on an unconscious level.

So, if you want to change your relationship with alcohol, if you want to drink less, if you want to stop drinking, what I hope that you can see as we've walked through this example is that just trying to hammer home willpower, it's not going to work, right? It's definitely going to feel like a slog.

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It might work temporarily. And when you use it, it's going to feel challenging. It's going to feel like no fun. Because willpower... Yeah, you can use it to grit your teeth and say no to your cravings... it's not going to help you learn how to loosen up in social situations. It's not going to help you learn how to get out of your head. It's not going to help you learn how to manage and talk back to your inner critic.

In fact, using willpower will do nothing to address the anxiety or insecurity that you may feel when you're around others. The reason why I want you to see this and understand this is because you start to see, "Oh, if The Mask Archetype is activated, and I want to drink less or I want to stop drinking," this is about more than just saying no.

This is about more than just having more self-control. It's about learning how to practice compassion towards yourself. It's about practicing viewing your insecurities and your anxiety as a shared experience. It's about learning the tools you need to challenge your 'compare and despair' thought patterns.

Now, on the surface, all of those actions, they may seem totally unrelated to your drinking. But they are incredibly important when it comes to habit change. So, yes, you will still need to learn how to work with your cravings. I talk about that all the time on the podcast. I have so many episodes on that, on learning how to have a different relationship with your cravings and learning how to manage them, and not constantly feeling like you're at war with them.

But that is not the only piece of the puzzle if you want to have success. You cannot just work with your cravings in a vacuum. You have to understand The Drink Archetype that is at play, that it's activated in the background.

What I shared with you today was just a little sample of how a think-feel-act cycle can work with The Mask archetype. Again, this is one example. It's

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not going to look the same for every single person. But I really do want for any of you who know that The Mask Archetype may come up for you in your drinking, I want to encourage you to see it for yourself.

What do you think your think-feel-act cycle looks like when you're in a social situation and you're feeling uncomfortable? What is that go-to thought that you have about drinking? What is that feeling that bubbles up inside of you? And most importantly, beyond just reaching for a drink to take the edge off and loosen up, what actions *aren't* you taking?

Spend some time considering this, because this is going to show you a very important and also overlooked place for most people about where you need to be focusing your energy if you want to unravel this archetype and change your drinking. All right, everybody, that's it for The Mask.

I'm going to be talking about The Hourglass Archetype next time, which is all about using alcohol to pass the time. 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.

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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.