

Ep #4: The Power of Narrating Your Experience



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kristi Angevine

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You're listening to episode 4. Today you'll learn The Power of Narrating Your Experience, why to do it, and how.

Welcome to *Habits On Purpose*, a podcast for high-achieving women who want to create lifelong habits and feel as good on the inside as they look on paper. You'll get practical strategies for mindset shifts that will help you finally understand the root causes of why you think, feel, and act as you do so you can learn to create habits that give more than they take, and now, here's your host physician and certified life coach Kristi Angevine.

Hello my lovely listeners, some of you I know very well, we've been friends for years, or we're besties from medicine or coaching, or I'm your coach, or perhaps we've never met in real life, but because we roam in similar Facebook groups or coaching circles, it's kind of like we've known each other forever. And some of you, we have yet to connect, but might one day, and either way, I want you to know that you're on my mind a lot.

I really enjoy spending time thinking about you and how I can best help, and yes, I get that when I say this, it sounds really creepy. What I mean is that when it comes to all the layers of working on habits, behavioral habits, emotional habits, habituated narratives running in our minds. When it comes to the thought work, the bodywork the real-life application of concepts, I'm always on the lookout for how I can make this work that I find to be so effective how I can make it accessible and practical for you.

Just like I used to spend a lot of my time thinking about how I could make my patient's experiences great. I now take time thinking about my clients and what they grapple with, and the ways that I can coach them so that they understand themselves better. And I think about you a lot because I know how hard it is to want more agency but not have any clue how to tap into it. I know what it's like to feel like I'm floundering and not in alignment with a life purpose, to feel like I'm disconnected to my priorities and not doing what I'm passionate about.

And I know how discouraging it can be to feel like bullshit habits and outdated rules are totally dictating my experience. So, whether we just got done coaching together or texting or having a Facebook messenger

Ep #4: The Power of Narrating Your Experience

marathon, or we just finished an early morning coffee date, or we've never met, you're on my mind pretty regularly. And I'm always aiming to bring something you something really high yield so you can tap into a deeper understanding of yourself and of your habits, and I hope that when you're going through your day, I can be a familiar voice in your mind to help you find all of the ways you can be more intentional.

Now, if this is your first episode, welcome; in the previous episodes, I've shared my philosophy about habit change and how it's a little bit different from what you'll usually hear. I've given a little bit about my story, and I've talked about the relationship between thoughts and feelings and our habits. In the last episode we explored the sneaky ways that the habit of perfectionism shows up.

If you haven't listened to those episodes, I invite you to go check them out because they lay a really nice foundation for what we're going to be talking about today, and that said, they are not mandatory for you to totally love what you're going to learn today, which is the power of narrating your experience. Today I'm going to sell you on this one really effective technique that helps for working to change the automatic ways that you think, feel, and act.

I'll touch on the idea that thoughts are optional. Now, this idea of optional thinking is something that you're going to hear me mention often, and we'll discuss it at great depths in future episodes, but for today I'm going to talk about how it relates to narration and how narrating can give you perspective and space from your in-the-moment experiences. This is important because when it comes to changing habits, knowing how to get perspective and space from your in-the-moment reflexive ways is really, really critical.

The approach I'm going to teach you is one that you can use in so many situations. It's a first step to self-regulate or recalibrate when you find yourself feeling really consumed in an emotion. It works wonders to help you pause and pivot when you're churning in something like rumination, catastrophic thinking, black and white thinking, and it's one of many ways

Ep #4: The Power of Narrating Your Experience

I'm going to teach you to self soothe and create a sense of calm and safety for yourself.

Now, before we really get into it, what I'm going to teach you is not something new. It's definitely not something I invented, and it's like most of what I'm going to teach you. It's compositive resources that I've been exposed to by my mentors, my colleagues, things I've been taught in trainings, and narrating one's experience is closely related to the mindfulness practice of watching your own thoughts and emotions in a detached, non-judgmental manner.

There are also several spiritual and religious practices as well as yoga philosophy in, which they reference in observing self. In psychology, it's often discussed as ones witnessing consciousness. But the way I'm going to explain it, I will make it really practical. By the end of this episode, you're going to know why the skill of narrating your experience is important when it comes to habits and exactly how to start doing it in your everyday life.

Now, in my husband's and I's travel dynamic, he is the driver, and I'm the navigator. Now, he doesn't drive just because he tolerates driving. This man loves to drive. He loves the mechanics and the technique of it, and frankly, although he would humbly deny this, I think in a parallel life, he could have probably been a Travis Pastrana or Colin McRae, which if you don't follow rally racing, they are really, are, and were really excellent rally racers.

Anyways, this setup works really great for us because of his love of driving, and he happens to also get motion sick if he reads while he's in the car. So, I really love being the navigator because I really enjoy looking out the window more than driving. And it may come as no surprise that of the two of us, I am the planner. I love the fun, the dreaming, and the organization of it all, but all of this to say, when it comes to planning road trips, he is the go-to for all the route planning, and his way of doing it involves pouring over different atlas', topography maps, and using Google Earth.

Our routes end up being really amazing, and we see the best things, and we stay in these most off the beaten tracks spaces because of his

Ep #4: The Power of Narrating Your Experience

research. The reason I bring this up is the part of his planning that's so integral to the route creation is using Google Earth. Now, I don't know if you've used Google Earth before, but you can zoom in, and you can see the dirt roads, or you can zoom out and see an entire area or even an entire state or country or continent or the whole globe. It is super cool, and what's possible in Google Earth, this zooming in or panning out, is parallel to the technique of narrating your experience.

Let me explain. Narrating your experience sounds like I notice I'm thinking the thought that, say, I don't belong. I notice I'm feeling the feeling of insecurity. I notice I'm ruminating about that conversation. Narrating is like Google Earth because as soon as you pause, breathe, and narrate what you're thinking, feeling, or doing. It's like going from walking down the gravel forest service road to panning out and watching yourself walk down that same road.

Narrating enables a sense of perspective because it shifts you out of what you're thinking and into a different thought. Usually, when you think something like, I notice I'm thinking the thought that. You'll feel calmer or at least more matter of fact than whatever you were previously feeling based on whatever you're previously thinking. This wider perspective that comes from narrating is just one of the ways you can start changing ingrained patterns and ingrained habits.

Now, there are many tools and techniques that help get perspective, and they help get perspective in hindsight, and for sure, some of the deepest work can come from reflecting on what's already happened, deconstructing it, revisiting it with new eyes so as to understand it better. But narration is so powerful because you can use it to get space, distance, and perspective in the present moment. In this way, it helps you develop the skill of directing your attention on purpose in the present moment.

When you can direct your attention and direct your mind on purpose, you get meaningful traction on habits that usually seem super challenging to alter, instead of experiencing things from within what I like to call the after-school special or the after-school drama created in our mind. When you

Ep #4: The Power of Narrating Your Experience

zoom out a little bit, just enough to see more than what's right in front of you, you get perspective. You get a wider view, just like when you zoom out on the Google Earth maps, and you see that the road that seemed like a great idea on an atlas map actually looks overgrown or looks like it winds through a canopy of trees, so the views you thought you could see are totally obscured.

So, to narrate requires three straightforward steps. Number one, notice what you're thinking, feeling, or doing. Number two, deliberately pausing. I like to recommend doing something to lengthen the pause, like, taking a few deep breaths taking a sip of water. And number three, hone in on what you're thinking, feeling or doing, or all of them, and then narrate or describe to yourself the thoughts, emotions, and actions you're taking.

I used this technique just the other week. I was preparing for a talk that I was going to give the next day, and I felt myself getting really tense. I started worrying I would forget what to say, that it would not make any sense to the audience, that the timing and the flow were just going to be one big disaster. I started talking really critically to myself, but not really noticing how mean it was. All I knew was in the moment; I felt that familiar pressure and anxiety that usually drive me to imagine the worst and second guess, etc.

So, as soon as I noticed what I was feeling and doing, I paused. I was out actually going for a walk, and I just stopped where I was. I took a couple of deep breaths. I had looked around at my surroundings. I took stock of what I was thinking, how I was feeling, and what I was mentally spinning in, and then I narrated. I'm thinking the thought that I'm going to bomb this talk. I'm feeling the emotions of anxiety and insecurity. I'm noticing that I'm ruminating.

I notice that I'm focusing on the negative, worrying, imagining getting judged. Now, doing this required that I pause and assertively pivot to thinking something new, and it took deliberate effort, but it wasn't really that hard to do. And as soon as I was a few sentences into narrating, you know what? I felt calmer. I was able to zoom out from my drama and kind of pan

Ep #4: The Power of Narrating Your Experience

back, kind of like, being above the clouds and out of the foggy drizzle, and this pivot to a more neutral headspace really allowed me to decide, do I want to continue down this line of thinking and second-guessing?

In the moment, I felt so miserable my answer was oh, hell no. In the moment, I was able to actually shift a little bit into the driver's seat and realize it wasn't the fact that I was about to give a talk the next day that was making me stress out. It was how I was thinking at the time, and yes, it felt totally necessary, and none of my thoughts felt optional, but by narrating, I showed myself that there could be an alternate way that wasn't going to be denying my experience, but just made space for a little bit of calm alongside my worry.

Now, how exactly does this work? How can narration create perspective and a new emotional state? How can narrating your experience to yourself be a tool for self-soothing and self-regulation? So, there are a couple things that work here, and understanding them is totally not necessary for using this approach in real life, but I know how most of my listeners are, and you love to understand the reasons that things work. Sometimes knowing the reasons that things work can really help you apply it may be more often or more effectively.

So, the first tenant to keep in mind is that thoughts evoke emotions. When I think the thought, oh no, I don't have enough time, I'm so screwed. I feel the emotion of overwhelm or panic. When I think the thought, I got this. I feel settled and resolute. So, when we narrate, we're offering ourselves a new thought. For me, I went from thinking I'm going to bomb this talk and feeling anxious to thinking I notice I'm feeling anxious because I'm thinking the thought that I'm going to bomb this talk.

The latter sentiment is a new thought, and that new thought generates a new feeling. Now, the next part of this is humans have lots of thoughts. Brains are like sentence-generating factories, and thankfully most of these sentences are subconscious; otherwise, the chatter of tens of thousands of thoughts per day would drive us crazy. I picture our thoughts are like an iceberg, and the unconscious and subconscious ones are the part of the

Ep #4: The Power of Narrating Your Experience

iceberg that's below the water surface, and the conscious thoughts are the little bit of that iceberg that you can see above the surface.

So, most of our thoughts are automatic. They're ingrained. They're conditioned by repetition, and oftentimes they're rooted in ways of thinking that we've inherited from socialization from culture from family and if you grew up in the United States, from post-industrial revolution mentality and from patriarchal ideas of worth and productivity. And although the bulk of our thoughts are automatic and subconscious, we can increase our awareness of them by tuning in to how we're feeling and paying careful attention to what we're thinking, but usually not explicitly noticing.

When we do this and then take time to narrate what we notice, not only do we feel differently, we now have the opportunity to realize that the reason we were feeling as we did was because of a sentence. It wasn't because of the circumstances around us, and we also have the chance to realize that the truth of the matter is that the way we're thinking is just one of many, many alternative ways we could think.

Now, this idea that thoughts are optional may seem totally obvious to you. Or it might be bending your brain a little bit; either way, it deserves some expansion. When we acknowledge that thoughts are optional, we open up an entire universe of possibilities. For me, on that day, if it's optional to think I'm going to bomb it, perhaps I could consider a thought that creates a less miserable experience. Now, you can easily see this concept that thoughts are optional at play when you are watching someone else.

Say you're listening to a friend who's sharing her experience because of how a meeting went, and she's totally bent out of shape because she thinks the meeting was a total mess. And you can see that she's making herself totally stressed out because of how she's interpreting things. And your perspective is that nothing actually went wrong it was actually a great learning experience. Perhaps she dodged a bullet by not having to do a project, and your perspective, your thoughts, they're optional thoughts you chose, but they make you feel differently.

Ep #4: The Power of Narrating Your Experience

So, this is pretty straightforward, right? The reason this concept can be so tricky is that what we think doesn't always seem to be optional in the moment. Thoughts happen so quickly, and much of the time, they don't seem like thoughts so much as observations. For the example, with the friend and the meeting gone bad to her, it's just a fact that the meeting was a dumpster fire.

In that moment, she doesn't see that the sentence that it's a mess is her subjective interpretation and not an observation of an actual fact. You, on the other hand listening in, have perspective and have a different thought, which also isn't a fact, but it's an optional way to see the meeting that creates a totally different feeling. And this thought is not one that's necessarily accessible or seems plausible to your friend.

That is often how it is when we're in the thick of believing our automatic thoughts. It's not bad or a problem, but it's just good to know that's what we do. So, just because a certain set of thoughts or sentiments or interpretations auto-populate in your brain doesn't mean that they're the only possible ones to think. It doesn't mean that they're necessarily useful. So, just because thoughts are there doesn't mean we must believe them.

Now, this idea alone can totally revolutionize your experience of yourself. Like, wait a minute, if thoughts are optional and just because they're there doesn't mean I have to believe them, and if thoughts create feelings, then the way I feel and how I act could be more flexible and valuable than I realized. What? This idea could also spur an existential crisis, so before you start questioning your identity and questioning reality in the way that leaves you totally feeling befuddled, just savor the idea that thoughts are optional.

Since thoughts are optional, we have more control than we realize when it comes to our emotions. Therefore, we have more control than we realize related to our habits. So, the technique of narration works because thoughts are optional. There's always an alternative available, and because thoughts create feelings so when we notice how we feel, when we notice what we're doing when we notice what we're thinking, and we pause, and

Ep #4: The Power of Narrating Your Experience

we narrate it to ourselves, we're allowing ourselves to think a different thought and this new thought permits a new feeling. And this new feeling helps us interrupt the previous looping of thought, feeling, action, thought, feeling, action that we might have felt stuck in.

Now, all of this is good, and well and intellectually, you may grasp it really, really fast. But if you don't bridge the gap between intellectually grasping the concept and actually applying it in your lived experience, it is totally pointless. So, narration works for the reasons we discussed and applying it is really simple. It just takes practice. Narration is a skill like any other.

The essential step is actually putting the skill into action. So, are you up for it? I think you're totally up for it, and it's so effective. Imagine doing it even just two or three times this week. Imagine if you did it two to three times a day? The deliberate pivot repeated over and over and over lays the groundwork for being able to really examine your habits and respond in a different way to really examine what experience your thoughts are creating for you.

This is a first step towards examining why you have the habits you have and how you can design them a new. So, the technique of narration might seem simplistic, but there's an elegant effectiveness to it. Now, since this crowd is populated with a bunch of high achievers, I have a bonus advanced move that I want to leave you with, and that bonus advanced move is to pair narration with compassion.

This way of compassionately watching your own thinking is actually inspired by what I learned from one of my most delightful mentors, Bev Aaron. She's known in the coaching world as kind of a ninja or Yoda of coaching, and she's a total powerhouse. She actually trains coaches and trains Master Certified coaches. She runs her own advanced deep-dive training that I was fortunate enough to have participated in. I know that I won't do justice to precisely the way she explains narration, but to narrate with compassion means you don't just stop with, I'm thinking the thought that.

Ep #4: The Power of Narrating Your Experience

Or I notice I'm feeling the feeling of, but you add on something like this, no wonder I'm feeling like this. I'm feeling this way because I'm believing something I've believed for years. Or you add on something like, of course, I'm thinking this thought. It's what I was taught. It's what made sense in the past. I've fought it for decades, or I notice that I'm second-guessing and that when I do that, I make it really hard on myself. No wonder it's so hard right now.

This kind of compassionate narration gives your mind not only the perspective you get from a neutral thought like I notice I'm thinking the thought that, or I notice I'm beating myself up, but it adds a layer of reassurance. I find it creates a feeling of palpable relief that's very soothing. In other episodes, you'll hear me discuss different ways we can create psychological safety for ourselves, and this is definitely one of those ways.

So now you know a very clear way you can get the Google Earth equivalent of panning out and getting perspective on your own habituated thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in the moment by using the technique of narration. Remember, the three steps to narrating are number one, notice your thoughts. Notice your emotional state or your behavior. Notice you're in the act of scrolling or fixating on minutia or second-guessing or feeling anxious or thinking, uh-oh, this is going to be so hard.

Number two, pause and breathe. Number three, narrate to yourself what you're noticing by saying I notice I'm thinking that. I notice I'm feeling the feeling of. I notice I'm doing. This could sound like I notice I'm thinking this is going to be so hard, and when I do, I notice the feeling of anxiousness, and I notice my behavior is to scroll on my phone. And for a bonus, add on some more of the compassion with, of course, no wonder, I get it. Yes, it's hard when we do that. Doing this is one of the foundational ways you can change any habit.

The reason that it helps is that it helps you interrupt the usual trajectory of automatic thoughts, automatic feelings, and automatic behaviors. Interrupting your habits in this way doesn't call on you to make a drastic change. It simply invites in some new awareness in the moment. So, try it

Ep #4: The Power of Narrating Your Experience

out and find me on all the places. Find me on Facebook at The Better Habits on Purpose group, on Instagram @Kristi.Angevine, my website, and let me know how it goes. And I will see you on the next episode.

If you like what you're hearing and think others would benefit from the *Habits on Purpose* podcast, I have a huge favor to ask. It would mean so much to me if you would take a few minutes to rate and review the podcast. Reviews are especially important in helping a podcast be discoverable. And I totally understand that it's really easy to not take the time to do a review.

So, to give you a little incentive to help me get this podcast off to a great start, I'm going to be giving away five-day designer planners and audible gift cards to listeners who follow, rate, and review the show. Now, it doesn't have to be a five-star review, although I really hope you love the podcast. I want your honest feedback, so I can create an awesome show that provides tons of value. So, for all the details about how you can win, visit habitsonpurpose.com/podcastlaunch, and I'll be announcing the winners on the show in an upcoming episode.

If you know someone who you think would get value from listening and you feel called to share it with them, I would be so very grateful.

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