

Ep # 10: Stop Asking Dead-End Questions



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kristi Angevine

Ep # 10: Stop Asking Dead-End Questions

Hi there, this is Kristi Angevine and you're listening to episode 10, stop asking dead-end questions. Learn what dead-end questions are so that you can spot them and change them.

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.

Here we are at episode 10. My goodness, this is both a small number and such a milestone. I imagine that this time next year I'm going to look back on all of these early episodes with such fondness. These early episodes are the beginnings of an entire body of work, one that I hope will be tremendously valuable to you.

Now, before we dive in I want to let you know that in the next episode I will begin announcing giveaways for those of you who have left the podcast a review. I'm going to be giving away a day designer planner and an audible gift card to five listeners. So if you've already left a review, thank you so very much.

Now, to officially get in on the drawing, all you have to do is leave a review on iTunes. And then let me know you left that review. The way you do this is in the show notes you can click on the short survey so that you can let me know that your review belongs to you. iTunes doesn't share your information and some of the nicknames that are listed with the reviews are not revealing of who you are. So if leaving a review is new to you, you can find all the instructions linked in the show notes.

So now for the topic of today's episode. Today's episode is all about questions. Now, in my family we love to travel, and we love to take road trips. And our kids are like all other children across the world who will ask how much longer and are we there yet over and over and over. And we've tried all the things to make it less torturous.

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And for our youngest, it seemed like we had this breakthrough when he could see and read the clock in the car. And we could just say, when it says 2:30 we'll be 15 minutes away. Now, this technique worked for a while, but then he started saying things like, "So how long is 15 minutes?" And you can imagine the puzzled looks on my husband and I's face.

So I would say, "Well, one minute is 60 seconds, so it's 15 of those." And he would ask, "Well, how long is a second?" And I would answer, "Well, it's this long, one Mississippi." And then he would say, "So why are there 60 seconds in a minute? And how come a minute takes along?" Followed up with, "And now how much longer?"

Now, I share this because we can all relate to that idea of kids asking how much longer and are we there yet? And what we observe children doing with questions on a road trip, wanting to ask questions, repetitively asking, repetitively upping the ante, this is representative to what our minds do even as adults.

And sometimes I tend to think of adults as so often we are simply tall kids. We look mature and sometimes we have wisdom, but sometimes some parts of us are just tall toddlers or tall middle schoolers. And in some ways our minds still operate like kids on a road trip. And that's where this episode comes in.

Today's episode is all about questions, and specifically the habit of asking dead-end questions. In this episode you'll learn three main things. First, you're going to learn why questions are important to understand in terms of their cognitive impact. You'll learn what dead-end questions are and why they're so problematic. And you'll learn how to ask better questions so you can leverage your natural inquisitiveness to your advantage instead of to your detriment.

Then, to keep it practical and doable in real life, I'll give you two simple specific choices for how to start changing how you ask yourself questions starting this week.

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So first of all, questions can be your ally in personal development, and habit change, and in pursuing any goal. But just like you need to understand how to use a tool properly to get the best results from that tool, you have to know how to ask questions effectively in order to get the most out of them.

If you don't know how to use a torque wrench, for example, you might be able to assemble your new bike. But you won't know how to do it in a way that gives you the full benefit of what the torque wrench is designed to do. Similarly with questions if you don't know exactly how to ask them, you will be slowing yourself down.

So why discuss questions? Well, humans are naturally really inquisitive. And in our running mental ticker, we ask questions of ourselves all day long. What's for dinner? Why did that happen? What were they talking about? What was she thinking? When am I going to exercise? What time is that meeting? How the hell am I going to figure this out?

Questions run through our mind all day long. And questions are powerful because our minds, our brains like to answer questions. With our natural curiosity, we have a natural tendency to seek answers, be it consciously or subconsciously. As a species we typically don't relish unanswered questions. Dangling loose ends, they signal uncertainty. And evolutionarily, uncertainty and not knowing, these could indicate danger.

So to the primitive lizard part of our minds, answers mean certainty, and certainty means safety. So when we ask questions, our minds set out on a mission to answer them. But oftentimes we don't ask questions in a way that is actually really useful to us. And the quality and the nature of the answers that we get are derived from the kind of questions we ask. And no one teaches this art of asking questions to us in say, fourth grade, at least not in my generation.

So let's talk about the kind of questions that are so common, dead-end questions. What do dead-end question sound like? Dead-end questions sound like this, what's wrong with me? Why are they such jerks? Where did the time go? Why do I always wait till the last minute? Who could possibly

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be as unlucky as me? How come nothing bad ever happens to so and so? How am I ever going to catch up? Why did she have to ruin my day? Why am I a black cloud on call?

What kind of dead-end questions are part of your normal refrain? So let's talk about what makes a dead-end question a dead-end question. Here are the characteristics, they are broad or abstract. The premise embedded in them is quite negative or personally indicting. They may be unanswerable, and they may overgeneralize and globalize.

Let's take an example. Take the question, what is wrong with me? When you ask yourself this question, what kind of answers do you usually get? Usually awful ones or no answers at all. So let's unpack this and see all the ways this is a total dead-end question that leads to wasting time and energy, ruminating, and engaging in self-critical thinking.

So number one, what is wrong with me is very broad. There's not a discrete answer, there are just very vague ones. Number two, the premise of the question is negative and indicting. It assumes there's actually something wrong, that there's something innately problematic. And the problem is this, when a question is embedded with a self-critical premise, the answer will be as well. What's wrong with me? Well, let me count the ways.

Number three, there's not really a way to answer this question. There's not a technical skill or a piece of knowledge that you might need that would fill in a gap to answer the question. But our brains are not only sentence making factories, but they are question answering experts. And as question answering experts, we want answers.

So with an unanswerable question, we will ruminate and spin on it. And we will try to find solid footing of a discrete answer, but that answer doesn't exist. So if ruminating is one of your habits, notice had dead-end questions may be the stimulus for this.

So before we contrast dead-end questions with an alternative, let me emphasize the impact that a negative premise has. If embedded in your

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question is a terrible or really mean premise or assumption, you're likely to get an answer that simply substantiates that premise.

Let me give you an example. Take these questions, what is my problem? And why does such bad luck always happen to me? These are dead-end questions because they're broad, unanswerable and they have a negative premise baked in. The assumptions are bad luck is indeed more frequent for the person who's asking the dead-end question. Also, bad luck doesn't just happen sometimes, but always. And there is something wrong with the person.

The answer our mind will seek to find will be things that support these premises. It sounds like this, what's my problem? I have the following problems, I'm disorganized, inherently defective, I'm not smart enough to prevent bad luck. Why does bad luck always happen? I don't know, but it does. Like remember that time in fourth grade, and then that time in middle school, and that one time at a cocktail party, and then last week.

We may as well convert these dead-end questions to statements. That sound like let me go find all the ways that I'm a problem. Let me go find all the ways it's true that bad luck always happens to me. So as you reflect on this, take a moment right now to answer for yourself, what's one of your go-to mental dead-end questions?

So some clues that you're asking dead-end questions lie in how you feel. Questions are simply sentences and as such they are thoughts. And thoughts invoke our emotions and feelings. So a clue you're asking a dead-end question is how the question makes you feel. Do you feel confused, anxious, worried, stressed, overwhelmed, guilty?

Another clue that you're asking a dead-end question is that you can't find an answer that doesn't feel awful. The answers we find are also thoughts that create feelings. So you may notice yourself thinking things that will make you feel terrible because the answers to vague self-critical questions will be vague, self-critical answers. For example, what's wrong with me? I guess I'm just lame, you're probably going to feel pretty awful.

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Asking dead-end questions is also a habit in and of itself. And if we look at it as a behavior, we get a clue that it's happening based on what else you do when you ask them. Dead-end questions pair so nicely with things like ruminating, catastrophizing, and beating yourself up.

Does this sound familiar? You have a running mantra through your mind that says, "How am I ever going to catch up?" It's like an annoying overplayed song that you really want to skip, but you can't. When you ask yourself over and over and over, "How am I ever going to catch up?" And then you go on to catalog all the obstacles to catching up. Recall all the times in the past that you had similar angst or similar experiences.

Forecast a terrible outcome where you never catch up and you're 95 years old, still fretting over your mental to-do list that never hit zero. And you tell yourself mean things like, "This shouldn't be so hard. But here I am again, other people don't struggle like me. This must mean I'm not good with my time." And then you run your to-do list again, and God forbid anybody come ask you if you want to change plans because that might just make your head explode.

Now, if you can relate to your own version of this, let me offer you some reassurance, asking dead-end questions and then ruminating on them is so common, yet it's totally a habit that you can change. It's a habit of thinking that no one ever taught us to watch out for. No one sat us down in elementary school and described it to us and taught us a better way. But that doesn't mean that it's fixed and unchangeable.

Now that you know what it might sound like in your mind, how it feels, and the characteristics of asking dead-end questions, change is just one decision away. Similar to what I discussed in episode nine about the skill of making decisions ahead of time, you can decide today, right in this moment, that you will change the tendency to ask yourself dead-end questions.

So how exactly do you change this tendency? The answer to this is almost the same as with any other patterned way of thinking or any other behavioral habit, you have to have awareness first. This awareness helps

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you start noticing in real time when that tendency is happening. And then from this real time awareness, you can commit to pivoting or interrupting that pattern.

So what's the alternative to dead-end questions? The alternative is to ask productive questions. What are productive questions? Well, productive questions are questions that are useful, effective, and powerful. Instead of being broad and vague, they are concrete and specific. Instead of having a negative assumption baked in, they have a neutral or positive premise embedded in them. They are not unanswerable, but they are answerable.

So I'm going to give you some examples by contrasting productive questions with dead-end ones so you can hear and feel the difference. So a dead-end question, why do things have to be so hard? An effective alternative, what are two ways to look for solutions? How could I make this easier? A dead-end question, how come I'm so stupid? A productive question, what is here for me to learn?

Notice how the effective questions have a concrete answer and a positive or neutral premise. Do you feel differently when you hear, how am I ever going to get this done? Versus when you hear, what are two things I can do right now to get started?

For me, when I ask myself, how am I ever going to get this done? I feel discouraged and a little overwhelmed. And that's because the premise of this question is the thought, I don't know how I'm ever going to get this done. And the other thought, I may never be able to do this.

And ironically, when I feel discouraged and overwhelmed, I don't go on to do anything productive. Rather, those emotions of discouragement and overwhelm, drive things like ruminating, worrying, forecasting worst case scenarios, running my to-do list but not taking any action.

When I hear the question, what are two things I can do right now to get started? And I think, let's find two things. I feel much calmer, perhaps just businesslike or focused, definitely not so wildly discouraged. And when I feel like this, I just get to work.

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And when we contrast these two types of questions, it really illustrates how thinking, the actual thoughts in our mind connects to the results that we create for ourselves and we ultimately experience. So when I start with a dead-end question that has a negative premise, that makes me feel discouraged, I don't do anything helpful. And the end result is I create more of a dead-end experience for myself, which makes it so much easier to keep thinking dead-end thoughts.

Versus when I start with a productive question that has a neutral premise that makes me feel matter of fact or focused, it might not be like Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs whistling while I work. But instead of being deep in the muck of ruminating, beating myself up, or catastrophizing, when I'm focused or just feeling matter of fact, I will take action. And then I create a much more pleasant experience from itself all from how I'm directing my mind with what I'm thinking and the questions I ask myself.

Now, how does this relate to habits? Habits are our repeated thoughts, feelings, and actions that culminate in the common experiences we create for ourselves. So repetitively asking dead-end questions will cause us to repetitively mull over negative premises. And this will cause us to have repetitive feelings that are not useful or helpful.

And these repetitive unhelpful feelings will lead to unhelpful actions that keep us stuck. And for habit change, we have to disrupt this cycle of business as usual and pivot away from creating more stuckness, which I don't think is a word, but that's okay.

So before I share some of my favorite productive questions, there are two things to keep in mind. Notice that when I'm talking about feelings and emotions, I'm specifically not saying bad feelings or good feelings. Because in reality, if emotions were on like a spectrum, there aren't actually bad ones or good ones.

There are simply feelings and emotions that are pleasant or unpleasant, useful, or less than useful, helpful, or less than helpful. And when it comes to thinking about dead-end questions, the emotions that are usually

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associated with them are ones that are not helpful, less useful, and less pleasant.

The other thing to keep in mind is noticing your own dead-end questions is a skill. And I'm willing to be a broken record player if it makes sure that you hear that as a skill, it is something that you first learn about, and then you learn by doing, and then you will mess it up. And then you do it again, and again, and again. And like learning a physical skill, you will develop proficiency over time, which is basically to say that it is something that requires practice.

And as something that requires practice, it may be something that doesn't come naturally to you. But I bet you can spot dead-end questions in other people a mile away. Like have you ever seen a kid stressing out about a school project that's due, who's saying things like, I'm never going to get this done? How am I ever going to do this in time? It's so easy to see someone else's dead-end questions and their negative thoughts that create their experience. And once you start paying attention to that same phenomenon in yourself, it becomes super easy as well.

Now, some of my favorite questions are ones that invoke emotions that I find to be really useful. Emotions like focus, or intrigue, or compassion, or commitment, encouragement, or courage. They are productive questions that sound like this, how can this be easy? What can I do to make this easier? What do I most need right now? What is the one thing I need to be willing to feel or to do?

What are three things that would be most loving or kind to do right now? How could I show up authentically as me without worrying about perfection? What are three other ways to look at this situation? Or what would I do if I trusted myself completely? Notice how these questions have either a neutral or a positive assumption built into them, and they are concrete, specific, and answerable.

Now, if you want a list that gives you ideas for more powerful questions, you can sign up to my email list and you'll receive it with your welcome

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email. And if you're already on the list, you're going to see that link to the list of powerful questions in today's email.

So as you start to consider the questions that you want to ask yourself, consider that the best questions are the ones that create emotions and drive actions that you find helpful. So ask yourself this, what are the questions that you want the answers to?

So to summarize, questions are powerful tools for change. We are curious beings and our minds like to answer questions. And when we ask dead-end questions, we tend to get dead-end answers. Remember, a dead-end question is unanswerable, broad, vague, and has a negative premise built inside, and it will elicit a negative answer. In contrast, effective questions are concrete, they're specific, and they are based on a neutral or positive assumption.

The solution to the habit of asking dead-end questions is to practice pivoting to effective powerful questions. So how do you do this? I'm going to give you two options that you can try this week. And I encourage you to pick the one that fits you best for where you are right now. One is not better or more effective than the other.

So option one is practice listening to dead-end questions and answer this question for yourself, how can I turn this dead end question into a productive question? And you can do this mentally, or you can do it on paper, or on the notes section on your phone, it doesn't really matter how you choose to do it.

Option two is this, ask yourself one productive question every day this week, and commit to answering it. Now you can answer it mentally or you can ask it to yourself before you go to sleep and then just trust that your mind will reflect on it as you rest. You can just craft the approach that really works for you. It doesn't matter how you do it, just that you do it.

Now, if you don't know what productive question that you want to ask yourself, try a version of this one, how could this be easier? Or you can tweak it a little bit and ask, what is one thing I can do to make this easy?

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And then after this week, the way that you can operationalize this more long term is to commit to doing either option one or option two every day for the next 30 days. And if as you do this you want support and encouragement, you can get it in the Facebook group. You can find that on Facebook at habits on purpose.

And if you want a deeper dive experience with shifting your habits, this is exactly the kind of work that we do in my small group coaching programs. Currently, these programs are for female physicians and enrollment for the next cohort is coming soon. If you want all the lovely details about the upcoming cohort for the physicians, as well as future groups for people of all vocations, just make sure that you're on the email list, it's linked in the show notes. And until next time, I'll see you soon.

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. And 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.

Thanks for listening to *Habits on Purpose*. If you want more information on Kristi Angevine or the resources from the podcast, visit habitsonpurpose.com. Tune in next week for another episode.