

Ep #112: Frazzled and Stressed? How to Stop Shoehorning



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kristi Angevine

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Welcome to Episode 112. I'm Kristi Angevine, and this is how to quit shoehorning.

Welcome to *Habits On Purpose*, a podcast for high-achieving women who want to create lifelong habits that give more than they take. 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. And now here's your host, Physician and Master Certified Life Coach Kristi Angevine.

Hello there, everybody. So, in Central Oregon, it is now a hint of spring weather. I really love the warmer days and the sunniness. It probably won't last for very long, but right now it's just glorious. Our sweet little dog, who's about eight or nine pounds, is a totally full-grown Chihuahua/Yorkshire Terrier and is one year old.

Some things have been really great lately and, as life is life, some things have been challenges. But one of the things that's really helping me is that I find comfort in the fact that if there weren't challenges, I would not be having the chance to learn something.

And there's a thrill for me in the process of learning. Not the ultimate goal of becoming an expert in a field or being well known for being an expert about something, but just the actual experience of learning new things. Learning new things about myself, about the world, learning a new skill, that process is so fun and fulfilling for me.

So, one of the ways I honor my desire to do this, is to purposely stop resisting what's hard in life. Because the things that are hard are there to teach me something. And that doesn't make them less hard, they're still hard, and a lot of times I don't like them, I wish they'd go away.

But concurrent with that experience, is just an inner knowing that there's something really valuable for me to learn from this. And that makes it honestly easier to deal with the stuff I'd rather not deal with. One of the things that's really been going very well and giving me just so much satisfaction is the Habits On Purpose for Physicians small group coaching program.

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I am always so humbled to see a group of people, most of whom don't know one another, come together and quickly share their struggles and goals in a way that reveals so much common humanity. The group this time is such a great group of women. If you're there and you're listening, hello, thank you for being there.

Right now, we've been discussing some really great things: How to change procrastination, why we procrastinate, how to refrain from self-judgment, what to do with overwhelm with the never-ending to-do list, how to start trusting yourself, how to start liking yourself.

And as of today, we still have some space in the group and it's not too late to join us. The program goes until the end of September of 2024, so if you've been on the fence this is your friendly nudge, come on over. The way you go to the program is HabitsOnPurpose.com/HOPP.

Now, if you're not getting emails from me you should sign up for them. The emails I send, they're full of things that I'm learning from my studies; thought provoking ideas, lots of different perspectives on habits that you can try out. And like the podcast, the emails are intended to be really practical.

I'm a fan of a very streamlined inbox, I don't like a lot of clutter. I don't like a lot of fluff. But I think my email is really valuable. So, if you're not getting them, you should go to HabitsOnPurpose.com and sign up. It's really easy, because when you go there you'll see a little box that says "Sign up for the newsletter."

And when you sign up you can also, if you want, put your cell phone number there. You can do this only if you want to get some of the helpful text campaigns I send. Sometimes I'll send inspirational quotes, concrete tips, prompts and ideas for what you can actually do in the middle of your every day. And sometimes this helps you actually get traction on some awareness during your day.

So if you'd like those, all of this information is kept by us; never sold, it's never shared; and you can always opt out at any time.

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The topic today is shoehorning. According to Merriam Webster, to “shoehorn” is to force or compress something into an insufficient space or to an insufficient period of time. It means to squeeze. The oft-cited example from Merriam Webster and Britannica is, “She shoehorned a year's worth of classes into a semester.”

Another example is, “They shoehorned three extra booths into a spot meant for one.” Or, “In a heroic attempt to get it all done, he shoehorned five errands and packed his bags between work calls and used his shuttle ride time to frantically answer his emails.”

Shoehorning, the way I mean this phrase today, is when you shoehorn you are working really, really hard to fit a lot of tasks or activities in a span of time where they really don't fit. You might have managed to squish them all in, but it's a push. Are there any experts shoehorners here? I am an expert at shoehorning.

I used to think it was really, really useful. I used to think it was an essential skill to have. It's honestly something I have to actively monitor in myself. And it's still something I'm learning how to refrain from, how to catch. And when I do notice myself doing it, how to change plans as needed.

To use “Parts” language, there's a part of me that sees shoehorning as really useful. This part thinks it's unfathomable to not try to squeeze in as much as I can into tiny pockets of time. This part is averse to slowing down, and its motto is, “I bet we can do it. It'll be fine.”

It's concerned with dumping on other people the things that it's actually possible for me to do. And it's very concerned with not getting all the important things taken care of. It fears squandering, and it fears other people's negative emotions. So, this part works really, really hard to prevent that. And shoehorning is its go-to.

Perfect example. Back in residency we had a month of night shift. That's just how we worked our schedule; every so often, for a month, you would go into work nights. So, what I would do to fit everything in, is I would skimp on sleep and I would get up and study. And then, I would shoehorn in a

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mountain bike ride before the shift, which meant that I would have to eat while I was studying.

I didn't have time for the typical bike maintenance that was really necessary to keep my bike in good working order. My shower would be just a few minutes long, and I wouldn't really tidy my hair or dry my hair. And if memory serves me correctly, I think I had some times driving to work where at red lights I would be putting on some mascara. I shoehorned in order to get through that time.

More recently, when I think about picking up the kids and getting them to soccer practice and picking up groceries, I'll often squish in a grocery store trip that needs probably 20, 30, maybe 40 minutes. And I will think that I can push it into a 15-minute window and expect that I can get home, put the groceries in the fridge, and then be on time to the next thing.

Because at one point in time, when there were all green lights, and there were no people in the grocery store, and there were no lines, and I had no trouble finding anything, I actually did do that grocery trip in 15 minutes. So, my mind thinks I can replicate this. And so, I shoehorned the afternoon.

Here's the thing, shoehorning seems really reasonable at first. And for me, I would take the rushing and the pressure and the tension that would come with it as just the way things go. Not as a sign that I was actually trying to do too much or under estimating how long things took. It's just how things were. Can you relate to this?

Now, let's be really clear, what is wrong with shoehorning? There's actually nothing intrinsically or universally wrong with shoehorning. And in fact, sometimes to shoehorn things is totally fine. Say I'm on a whirlwind trip back to the southeast where I used to live. Hello, all my Chattanooga peeps. Say I have two days there, and I really want to see a bunch of people but I don't have hours of time to spend with each person.

So in that particular situation, I will happily shoehorn on purpose. I will stack visits as close together as I can, because I have no idea when I'm going to see these people again. I will deliberately take on the fast pace because I'm

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prioritizing quantity. And when I do that on purpose, I know to expect things are going to feel a little squished.

Or say I have a really tight timeline where I need to take one kid to soccer, pick up our dog, get the other kids at their soccer practice, and I'm solo parenting. And if I don't have carpooling help, I might choose to shoehorn a bit. We might be a little late to a few things.

But the shoehorning technique, shoehorning paradigm, is known upfront, it's done on purpose. And doing this on purpose makes a huge difference to the potential stress that I might feel if I do start running behind.

Here's the key, shoehorning is a neutral act. You can feel matter of fact and content as you do it. Or you can feel like a pressure cooker without a release valve as you do it. It's all based on whatever part of you is present as you do it. It's based on your expectations, and it's based on how you think and feel while you shoehorn.

But generally speaking, let's keep it real, shoehorning as a habit is really quite stressful. And the problematic version of shoehorning that I'm talking about is stressful because it comes from time scarcity.

Now, if you're a visual person, think about this analogy of two plants. Both plants come from the same seed. You take a seed and you put it in one pot of soil, and that soil is time scarcity. You take another seed and you put it in another pot of soil, and that soil is strategic matter-of-factness.

Both plants grow, but the result is each plant looks very different. Each plant feels very different. There's a totally different experience when you do something from scarcity versus when you do something from matter-of-fact, strategic energy.

So, let's talk about the stress of shoehorning, shall we? I'm going to start by talking about how something so stressful can become a habit. Why would we habitually do something that is persistently stressful? Well, the reason shoehorning can become a habit, even though it feels terrible, is because it doesn't necessarily feel bad in the beginning.

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Sometimes it can feel good to put 10 things on your to-do list and map out exactly when you're going to do them. We think things like, "I am being so efficient. This actually lines up perfectly. I bet I can do this. Oh, heck yeah, I can totally do this." Now, I don't know about you, but when I think about these things I feel pretty great. When you're really focused, you might actually get a ton done in a short period of time.

Which brings me to the second reason shoehorning can become a habit. In addition to feeling good at first, it can literally start out very efficiently at first. And there's, therefore, a reward for the inaccurate estimation of how much you can do in a period of time.

But here's the catch, when reality catches up with an idealistic plan, either tasks need to be modified or abandoned, or the timeline in which they're done has to be lengthened. And for many of us, that's when we start feeling like we're in a pressure cooker. The clock is ticking, time is running out, the number of things we planned to do in the available time are not lining up.

We have 20 minutes that is allotted to get across town and back by car. And in the afternoon traffic is going to take 45, if we're lucky. When the math of the time and the tasks don't add up we might get really abrupt with our communication, impatient with other drivers, frustrated by these teeny tiny impediments that usually wouldn't bother us. And little by little we get edgy and thin skinned, and really, really tense.

We get curt, snippy, critical, we yell, we're annoyed at humanity, we're mad at ourselves, we're mad at reality. Let me tell you, it is super fun. And all of this occurs because we set up to do more than realistically can be done, and we aren't aware of the fact that we're doing this on purpose. It's all because we set out to shoehorn things into an inadequate span of time, without acknowledging this is exactly what we're doing.

So here's the pearl of wisdom: Just because you can, doesn't mean you should. You *can* quit your job and flip off your boss as you channel Jennifer Aniston's character, Joanna, in that movie *Office Space*; which, P.S. I will link in the show notes. If you haven't already seen that film, it's from 1999. It's this hilarious, satirical comedy that I think everybody should watch.

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So, you can do that. You *can* pick up a piece of gum off the floor or underneath a desk, and do the unthinkable and pop it in your mouth. You *can* go out to eat every night of the week, even though you're trying to save money. You can do a lot of things. But just because you can, doesn't mean you should. And just because you can, doesn't mean it's a good idea.

This is what is forgotten with the habit of shoehorning. So, just because I can write down 10 things to do between school pickup and dinner... And just because at one point and time I was able to shoehorn all that in into these tiny three hours, it doesn't mean I should always try to cram it all in. And here's where shoehorning holds its allure even when we know better, and even when we intellectually know that it often leads to a pressure-fest, feeling overwhelmed and scatterbrained.

When we are already spread too thin, and we haven't had sufficient time to do the things we want to do, when we have a ton that we want to get done, shoehorning can seem like the only solution in order to keep our nostrils above the edge of the water.

And indeed, short of delegating or hiring someone else to do the things that you want done, shoehorning offers the promise of maybe, just maybe, we can catch up. But here are the three lies that are baked into shoehorning.

Lie number one, it will work. Lie number two, there's no significant cost and there's net gain. Lie number three, accomplishing things makes us feel better. Let me explain each of these.

Lie number one, we think it'll work. And maybe, honestly, here and there it does. But for the long-haul shoehorning leads to more stress and less productivity. Shoehorning doesn't reliably work. Think about it. It's not something that a think tank, a brilliant strategist, would come up with as a beneficial approach to do on purpose regularly.

Lie number two, we think there's not a cost, or we forget there's a cost. When in fact, the cost is very high and the gain is low. The truth is, shoehorning offers no net gains. Let me explain. You might have brief bursts of focus time and get a lot done, which actually might be an

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indication that when you are focused you are really efficient. And that part of your plan might not actually be shoehorning, but simply a period of time in which you have high mental focus.

But when you cross the threshold of adequate time for tasks to inadequate time for tasks, you've turned into a frazzled wreck while you're accomplishing the things that you'd like to do. This means you shave a few things off your list, and you get some of the desired tasks done, but at what cost?

Your task completion is preceded by hours of being frazzled and stressed. So, imagine a decade of daily stress, always feeling strained, overstretched, as you get your things done. Sure things get done, but your psyche and your body are running on fumes. Your adrenals are probably like raisins, and you're on the brink of burnout and collapse.

The cost of shoehorning is therefore high, and there is not a net gain. With shoehorning, the truth is there is no net gain.

Alright, lie number three, we think that accomplishing things makes us feel good. We think that once we complete a certain number of things on our list that the completion will make us feel better.

“Once the garage is decluttered, I'll be able to relax. Once the groceries are in the fridge and the dinner is made, and I'm finished editing those grant proposals,... Once my inbox is clear... Once X-Y-Z are done, I'll feel more settled. When the boxes are unpacked, I'll feel calm.”

Getting more things done is *not* what makes us feel more calm, more settled, more accomplished. It seems like it's what makes us feel that way, but stick with me here and let me explain. What actually makes us feel better, on the other side of things crossed off our list, is whatever we allow ourselves to think.

Things like, “Job well done. I am making progress. I've got it handled. Now that list isn't so massive, woof. Ah, inbox zero, baby.” When we think this way, that's what causes us to feel good.

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Now, you might say, “But Kristi, I genuinely do feel better when I've completed a task or when my list is shorter. And when my space is decluttered. And my kids have gotten to and from their sports and dinner's on the table. I really do feel better then. And I feel worse when these things aren't done. So, what gives?”

Well, on one hand, let's be clear, there is a science of people's experience in spaces that are cluttered, versus people who experiences in spaces that are really tidy and organized, that suggests that for some of us, we do have some visceral anxiety and sense of things being unsettled when we're around a bunch of things that seem cluttered. Conversely, we feel more relaxed when we're in a serene, organized, uncluttered space.

This is not to deny that. But here's the thing, in our lived experience we often correlate circumstantial things with our emotional state. If the to-do list is complete; which is a circumstance; we feel satisfaction and calm; our emotions. When we have 25 things to do in two hours; which is our circumstance; we feel frazzled and stressed; which is our emotional state.

What we forget, is that in between the circumstance and our emotional state is a way of thinking. Or to use IFS “Parts” language, in between the circumstance and our emotion is a part of us that makes an interpretation and has a narrative about what the circumstance, about what the ‘to-do list complete’ means, and about what the 25 things to do in two hours means.

So, check it out, it's like this, one person completes their to-do list and feels utterly serene and accomplished. Because a part of them thinks, “Ah, nothing more to do. Job well done. Now, all I need to do is relax.” Another person completes their to-do list and feels tense and a sense of dread. Because they think, “That damn inbox is going to fill up tomorrow, I'm going to be behind again. There's always too much to do. I cannot keep up.”

A completed to-do list does not guarantee that we feel better. The things done or not done are *not* why we feel as we do, even though there is a correlation. In research, we would say there's a “correlation” but not a “causation”.

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So, when we have more to do than is civilized to have on our plate, and we shoehorn tasks in, and we think that the ultimate result of fitting everything in is going to make us good, we are sorely disappointed. Because we are forgetting that the way we feel is connected to what we tell ourselves, not how much we squeeze in.

Here are the three lies again. Lie Number one, it will work. The truth is, it doesn't. Lie number two, there's no significant cost and there's net gain. The truth, the cost of shoehorning is high and there is no net gain. And lie number three, we think accomplishing things makes us feel better. But the truth is, it's what we *think* that makes us feel better.

So, if you feel like there's more to do than is humanly possible, and shoehorning seems like your only option, I want you to consider what is your day in/day out, year after year experience going to be when you spend many hours each day trying to force in more than is humanly possible?

Now, it's not necessarily easy to quit shoehorning, but it is possible to forever quit shoehorning as a habit without sacrificing being productive. And when you are shoehorning you have the chance to feel more calm, feel more clarity, and have more patience. And honestly, this makes it easier to be focused and productive.

So, we can shoehorn on purpose when there's a specific, rather exceptional set of circumstances we're in. But we can forever stop the stressful, compulsive shoehorning that's a habit.

How the heck do you change it? The first thing you do to change shoehorning is you start noticing you're doing it. Where do you shoehorn? For me, it's often with work and after school activities and minor household tasks. So, for you, where do you shoehorn?

What's it feel like when you're planning to shoehorn? And what's it feel like when you are in the middle of it? And lastly, what's an alternative approach that works for you? Just brainstorm. Think a little bit outside the box. Your brilliant brain will tell you exactly what a better alternative to shoehorning is if you just listen.

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And if you want to join an amazing group of women physicians who are actively working on things like this; things like procrastination, second guessing, numbing, buffering, a harsh inner critic, etc., the current round of Habits on Purpose for Physicians, it still has space. We would love to welcome you in.

We even have a new addition coming to the program, which I'm really excited about. We're going to bring in Dr. Ali Novitsky, she's going to do an advanced class about the Empowered Stress Scale. And I'm doing a series of IFS teachings that you're not going to find in standard coaching.

These two things are really instrumental to creating sustainable change. And you get them when you're inside Habits on Purpose for Physicians. So, if you want to join us, check out HabitsOnPurpose.com/HOPP, and I will talk to you next week.

I hope you found that valuable. And this is what I'd like to leave you with. If you want structure, accountability, and community, and personalized guidance to do all the things that I talked about in this episode, and all the things that you learn about from the podcast, I want to welcome you to join the Habits on Purpose for Physicians small group coaching.

If you're listening to this in real time, in March of 2024, there is still room in the group. You can get all the information at HabitsOnPurpose.com/HOPP, and there are a couple of ways that you can join.

You can join and pay monthly, you can join and pay in full, or you can apply for the partial or full scholarships. Money need not be a hurdle for changing your life in a way that makes you feel better and puts you more in the driver's seat of your own life. So, go to HabitsOnPurpose.com/HOPP and I will see you next week.

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.