

Ep #123: Habits of Thinking: Two Painful Thoughts to Watch For



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With Your Host

Kristi Angevine

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Welcome to Episode 123. I'm Kristi Angevine, your host, and I'm here to help understand why you think, feel, and act as you do, so you can be intentional with your habits and your life.

Today's episode is about two painful thoughts that are common refrains that march along like a news clicker in our psyche sometimes and create so much day-to-day stress and struggle. Do you have these two thoughts? Keep listening to find out.

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, hello, everybody. So, it is officially summer. Where I live in Central Oregon, it is currently warm, it is beautiful, and there's tons of pollen. As it turns out, this particular year, there's a whole lot more smoke than we normally get this time of year. I live in a part of Oregon where wildfires are really common.

So, if you live in a fire country, you know that this time of year is really common for fires. And this year, we are a designated test site for prescribed burns. What they're doing is prescribed burns close to communities in an effort to see if doing these will actually reduce the threat of wildfire burns that will ultimately cause big damage to towns.

It's a pilot program, and it's basically to see if these proactive burns prevent bigger fires. As well as prevent some of the prolonged exposure to smoke from the wildfires that happens when there's these massive, unpredictable, uncontained fires that usually go on through the rest of the season.

So, living in a place where wildfires happen regularly is totally new to me. I came from the southeast; hello to all my Chattanooga, Tennessee people. And the things that we would contend with there were things like poison ivy and tornadoes. All to say, currently, the weather in Central Oregon is really gorgeous.

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And as I was thinking through the topic for this week, and thinking about how the weather is and the prescribed burn site, etc., I realized that there's a parallel in using the idea of the prescribed burn pilot program as a metaphor for what I am talking about. It's going to help kind of put it in perspective. So, just keep that in the back of your mind as you listen.

At the end, I'll pull it all together. Because I love a good metaphor to explain things. So, what I want to talk to you about today is a very specific duo of painful thoughts. I want to talk about the quality of these thoughts, and what to do if you have these as background music in your subconscious or conscious mind.

The thoughts that I want to address today are the thoughts, "I should know better." And its counterpart, "I should be further along than I am right now." How many times a month do you notice yourself having these thoughts? Or maybe I should say, how many times a week or how many times a day do you think this kind of thing?

I find that these are some of the most painful thoughts. And when we believe that we should know better, or believe that we should be further along than we are, it's really hard to persuade ourselves there's validity to anything different. Basically, when we are in the jar, we don't realize we're in the jar and we can't read the label.

So, today I'm going to talk about what happens when we fully believe in and are blended with these thoughts, and why their presence might make sense. And then, how to get untangled from them.

To put this into meaningful context, I want you to think of a time when you've had these thoughts in your mind. So, these thoughts are, "I should know better," and/or, "I should be further along than I am right now." Think about times when you've had them.

Maybe something didn't go as you planned. Maybe you missed a deadline, or you weren't accepted for an award. Maybe despite your best efforts you missed the mark, and what you hoped would happen just didn't. Maybe if you're into personal development or you're a coach, these thoughts surface

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when you find yourself in the thick of a recurrent painful issue that you thought you had already figured out.

Perhaps you have a milestone in your life, maybe a birthday, maybe an anniversary, maybe a certain time of year that prompts you to reflect on your life. And when you look at your job, your health, your family, your friendships, your anything, these sentiments of 'I should know better, I should be further along,' they bubble up to your consciousness.

Or maybe these things come up for you when you've just had a bad day, and you've experienced shame, anxiety, worry, overwhelm. Or you found yourself in the middle of some recurrent pattern and you really feel like you can't seem to extricate yourself from it. Maybe this is when these thoughts come up for you.

So, I want you to bring combined circumstances when you notice that you think 'I should know better. I should be further along.' Now, if you're listening to this somewhere in your car, or you're walking, and you have the chance to just press pause, because you really want to think about this carefully, feel free to do that. If you're sitting someplace where you can write, or you can type, journal this out, you can also pause and do that too.

But if you like to do this in real time, now that you've got that circumstance in mind, I want you to just check in and reflect on how you feel when you think about these things? How does it feel to think, "I should have known"? Take a moment right now and just play that idea in your mind.

What does it feel like? What's it brings up emotionally? Do you notice any sensations? Do you notice any images? Any memories? What comes up for you and you think, "I should have known"? Make a mental note of what you experienced thinking this.

And now, how about, "I should be further along"? Do the same thing. Do a check to see what emotions this idea brings up. Is there any location in your body where you feel it most? Do you have any images, memories, sensations? Just notice whatever you notice.

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Now, when you do this, you may have noticed things like a heaviness, a constriction, a pit in your stomach, a tightening. You may have felt anxiety, discouragement, embarrassment, inadequacy. And if you did, it's because the lens through which we look at the world shapes what we are able to perceive.

When we think 'I should know better,' we're actually thinking, "Let me go find all the ways that it's true that I should know better." When we think 'I should be further along than I am right now,' we're actually thinking, "Let me go find all the ways that it's true that I should be further along than I am."

Now, the next thing I want you to do is I want you to think about what you do when you feel the weightiness of discouragement or incompetence, or whatever emotional qualities came up for you when you thought those thoughts.

Often, when we're in this state, we'll do things like compare ourselves unfavorably to others. We'll see all the ways other people are better, further along, smarter, the way they deal better, have an easier time adulting, etc. We'll often recall all of our struggles. We might even conclude that we're defective or failures, we don't belong, we don't measure up. We might tell ourselves that we aren't cut out for the job.

Sometimes we may flash forward to a future where our deficiencies have continued and worsened. We then beat ourselves up. We might isolate or withdraw, and we see the world and ourselves through this dark, glum, pessimistic lens.

And what don't we do? We usually don't have much perspective. We can't see the big picture. We definitely don't take action to remedy whatever was hard. We don't share and let people know what we're feeling. And at the end of the day, kind of like a bad joke on us, all we can see is that we don't know what we should and we never will, and that we aren't where we should be and we never will be.

It is such a painful experience. And I know the pain of this because I have lived it. And the thing is, it's easy to not even realize that we're thinking

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these things. It's easy thinking, "I should know better. I should be further along," to just fly under the radar.

And there are three main reasons you might have this going on, but not even realize it. Number one, it could be going on, but under the radar. Because the sentiment can be subconscious. It's just a vague inkling. It's not an explicit mantra you're chanting to yourself. You may just sort of notice feeling inadequate, but you don't quite know why. Well, this might be in the background.

Number two, you might not notice it because you dismiss these thoughts as meaningless. You think, "You know what? Everybody thinks that sometimes. Everybody thinks 'I should know better. I should be further along. It's just some neurons firing. It's random chatter. Because I'm not a person who's negative.'"

Listen, I can't tell you how many times I've personally said, and I hear my clients say things like, "I'm not a pessimist. I'm not a negative person. I'm not a..." fill in the blank... "type of a person. I don't have a harsh inner critic. That's just not the type of person I am." And when we do that, we dismiss or ignore something that's actually quite meaningful.

And when we do that, we don't even notice the impact that those thoughts might have. So, instead of noticing the thoughts as thoughts, you just believe these are an observation of your reality. As in, it's just true with a capital T. These thoughts are not optional ideas, but from your perspective, they're just an observation of the state of things of you and the world.

So, is this you? Do you think that perhaps you have these thoughts and maybe they're lurking less in your consciousness? Or are you the type that really already knows that you think these things a lot? Either way, let's just consider how could having these thoughts make sense.

They cause so much trouble; how could they make sense? Well, many of our recurrent thoughts are simply there because of repetition. We have thought about them hundreds of thousands of times. And so, they

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reflexively auto-populate at any opportunity. They are the neuronally wired patterns of being.

Other times they're present because they're hand-me-downs. We saw the ideas modeled in our family. Perhaps we had a parent that said things like, "Gosh, I should know better." Or they said things like, "I should be further along than I am right now."

Or perhaps we heard them from a parent or caregiver telling them to us, "You, you should know better. You should be better. You should be further along by now." And over and over and over again, we were sort of indoctrinated to absorb the sentiments.

Or we might not have gotten anything from our family that was in the realm of 'I should know better. I should be further along,' but maybe we absorbed it from the media. Because in the media there are these implicit messages, whether they're in magazines, or movies, or in products that are being sold. And the implied message is, "That if you knew more, you'd be successful and happy and loved and respected. And if you don't feel amazing, there's probably something that needs to be fixed."

IE, "I'm not feeling great in my life, my body, my work, my relationships, compared to what I see in magazines, on TV, in movies, on the social media highlight reels. And so, therefore, I conclude I should be further along."

There are implied messages that when you are doing adult life right, then you're going to feel good. So, if you don't feel good, there's a problem. And probably, it's because you should know more or be further along.

And the last reason why these thoughts make sense, is that in the personal development world, ironically, there can be these sorts of ideas, rumblings. That when you've done all sorts of inner work, you've done the deep dive to see what's going on for you.

When you've explored your patterns, you've untangled your limiting beliefs, that you've reached, or you will reach, this sort of evolved, enlightened contentment. This place where you're not bothered by all the things that

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maybe your less evolved self is bothered by. And there's a certain ease that's placed on a pedestal.

The implication is, "If you don't feel that, there's something wrong." Therefore, it can be easy to conclude that you're not where you should be, you don't know what you should know, simply because you're not feeling great. So, if you have any of these refrains of 'I should know better, or I should be further along,' it makes a whole lot of sense they're there.

So, what do we do about them? The first thing, that's the most important thing, is simply to just bring awareness of the fact that they are present, the fact that they make sense, and the fact that they're extremely common. To thoughtfully pay attention to these, and then to thoughtfully pay attention to how you feel when they are there, is the first step.

When does this happen for you? How do you feel? What are your actions and inactions when these thoughts are the driving background music in your brain? And when they're there, what do they end up creating downstream for you in your experience of your day to day?

The act of being aware of, and deliberately noticing the thoughts and the downstream emotional and action results, is a way to separate yourself from these thoughts. And as we say in Internal Family Systems, to unblend from the parts of you that believe these sentiments.

So. Here's what I want to invite you to try this week. Start paying attention to when these ideas or thoughts run through your mind, even if they are very subtle. And remember I alluded to a metaphor related to the prescribed burns, well, here you go. This is where we get to use those prescribed burns as a beautiful metaphor.

Prescribed burns target higher risk fuel sources for wildfires, so that when the summer conditions are really right to start fires, there's less dry kindling lying around waiting to become this uncontained 5,000-acre bonfire.

Just like a prescribed burn tends to potential fuel sources, instead of letting these thoughts that just auto-populate run around and randomly show up, like a wildfire in a dry, hot fire season, and then leave you with an

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unexpected hard-to-stop, easy to get carried away with, challenging fallout from believing that you should know better or be farther along. Instead of doing that, you're going to do a prescribed burn approach.

You're going to look for these thoughts on purpose. And when you find them, you're going to do the equivalent of a prescribed burn. I don't mean you're going to eliminate them. But what I mean is, you're going to pause and pay attention to them in a way you don't ordinarily do.

You're going to look around at the circumstances in which these thoughts occur. You're going to look for the trends and their patterns. You're going to notice how you feel when you believe them, and pay attention to what actions and inactions they drive for you.

Just by paying attention on purpose, you'll more quickly notice when these thoughts show up in the future. And this act of noticing will help you anticipate other circumstances in which you typically go to these default thoughts. So, instead of having a wildfire of painful thoughts that just catch you off guard, you do the equivalent of a proactive, controlled, prescribed burn by addressing thoughts head on.

And what this ultimately does for you, is it essentially reduces the proverbial potential fuel that's just sitting around waiting to possibly burn wildly.

Because what you do, by addressing the thoughts proactively, is you anticipate. "They're going to show up. This is how I recognize them. When I recognize them, they feel like this. And when they feel like this, this is what I do. It happens in these circumstances. So, now I can prepare myself for when they might show up. And so, I can catch them more quickly when they do show up."

"And because I do that, I'm more likely to pick up on the early stages of believing something that doesn't serve me, that's not necessarily true, before I am stuck in this massive shame spiral of believing that I should know better. Or believing that I should be further along."

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Give it a try. Do the mental/emotional equivalent of a controlled practice so that you don't get caught off guard by the mental/emotional equivalent of a raging forest fire. All you need to do to do this is to plan to look for thoughts like, "I should know better. I should be further along."

Check in to see how they make you feel. Notice what you do and you don't do. And look for the circumstances in which it is very easy for you to go there. Give that a try. Let me know how it goes, and I will see you next week.

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Take care my friends.

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