

**Ep #132: From Crisis to Compassion: Dr. Stella Evans on Coaching,
Personal Transformation and Internal Family Systems**



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kristi Angevine

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Ep #132: From Crisis to Compassion: Dr. Stella Evans on Coaching, Personal Transformation and Internal Family Systems

Welcome to Episode 132. I'm your host, Kristi Angevine, and this week I'm here with a conversation with a friend, a colleague and a client, Dr. Stella Evans. Dr. Evans is a practicing pediatrician, a life coach, and a Master Practitioner of Neuro Linguistic Programming, otherwise known as NLP. She has trained extensively in Internal Family Systems. I know you're going to love this conversation, so let's get started.

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.

Kristi Angevine: Dr. Stella Evans, welcome to the podcast. I am so delighted that we get to have a conversation. And as we were kind of talking about before we started recording, this is a little bit of my excuse to be able to connect with you just so that we can talk all things coaching.

So, thank you for your time.

Dr. Stella Evans: Oh, thank you for having me on your podcast, my dear friend. It is so wonderful to see you and to hear your voice and to just be able to spend time in your presence.

Kristi: The sentiment is mutual. I wish everybody could see where you are right now. And so, I'll get you to describe that in a minute. But for people who don't already know you, Stella, can you just introduce yourself?

Stella: Well, I would love to. I'm Stella Evans and I live on Anishinaabe and Dakota land in Minneapolis, Minnesota. I'm a pediatrician and I do complex care. I am currently the medical director for the Spina Bifida Clinic at Children's Hospitals and Clinics of Minnesota.

And I am currently in a converted closet that used to be where we kept the code cart. It is an office now because I say it is an office. And so behind me there's a door and I have a black jacket and a white coat. And that is, I think

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all that you can see, other than the fact that my normal work attire is black jeans and some kind of colored T-shirt.

Kristi: Stella also has this lovely, so lovely colored shirt. It's like a very, very deep royal blue. And she has a little bit of the color, that same color in her hair. And then also has a red that it's harder for me to see. Do you have a window?

Stella: Code cart closet; the code cart could not enjoy a view. So, it was not wasted on the epinephrine and the intubation equipment.

Kristi: Stella, can you tell the people who are listening something about you that somebody that you run into at the hospital might not know, like a hobby or just something a little personal?

Stella: I'm allergic to elephants.

Kristi: Please tell me how you found this out.

Stella: Well, I am a bit older, I'm almost 50. And when I was young, back when the stones were soft and the water was pure, and we all drove cars using leaded gasoline, circuses would come to small towns and many of them would have elephants.

And you could ride the elephants for, I don't know, some five bucks for an elephant ride or something. And of course, who doesn't want to ride an elephant, right? And so, I would go with my friends when I was in high school and my eyes would swell and I would start sneezing.

And at first I thought, "No, it's just the hay, it's the dirt," it's the whatever. And after a few years, I started to get hives wherever I had touched an elephant. And then, by my senior year, if I was within their vicinity, I began to sneeze and wheeze.

And if I touched the elephant, I would have hives and I'd be sneezing and I'd be wheezing and it would be hard to breathe. And it's just truly a pity, because they are absolutely magnificent and wonderful animals.

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And unfortunately, that persists to this day. If we go to the zoo, I can't go near the elephants. And when the circus, which now are the, yeah, I guess it is a circus, comes to the metro area, when the elephants come out, even in the air-conditioned stadium seating, if we're too close, I have to get up and leave or take out my Albuterol inhaler.

Kristi: Who would have guessed? Love that.

Stella: I would never have guessed someone could be allergic to elephants, but there you have it. Even well-bathed elephants.

Kristi: I love this, Stella, because I have a vague notion you may have mentioned that to me in the past, but I'm not entirely sure. So, you and I, we've known each other for quite a long time. And as I was kind of coming into this call, I was kind of reflecting on when we met, how we met, things like that.

And one of the things I would love to do on this podcast is explore your coaching journey a bit. And one of the things that you didn't say when you were saying who you were is that you are an amazing coach. You coach clients.

You probably bring some of the coaching into your pediatric practice with the parents you deal with. But you do a lot of work with Internal Family Systems. So, we have a lot of overlap in our passions and our approaches to things.

And one of the things I realized, that I don't think I've ever asked you Stella, is what you thought of coaching? Specifically, life coaching as opposed to sports coaching. What you thought of life coaching before you started doing it, before you started learning about it. Do you have a notion?

Stella: I had no idea what it was. I mean, it was kind of in there with people who would talk about hot yoga and all raw diets. And I mean, I kind of vaguely, subconsciously lumped it in there with some of that stuff. I'm like, "Okay, I mean, good for you, and not for me."

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And at the time when I discovered, in the same way that we would say that Columbus discovered this continent, when I discovered life coaching, which had been thriving and didn't really need me to discover it, I was in extremis and it was really 'any port in a storm' kind of situation. I thought, "Well, you know what? I can i.d. worms at this point if I thought it would give me a chance of helping. So, maybe this might help too."

And I was really surprised to learn that there is actually a robust body of literature. There are many, many clinical trials in the psychological literature. And now those trials are actually moving into the medical literature to show efficacy for coaching in terms of reducing distress and increasing autonomy and increasing the amount of self-compassion that individuals feel.

Kristi: Yeah, I'm so glad you mentioned that because I think that's something that was just wildly absent in my idea of coaching when I first "discovered" it. We're both doing air quotes around discovered. I also just didn't realize that there was, number one, even a field of coaching. And number two, research to back up and give us solid footing for why it works, how it works, the fact that it does work.

So, with you being in extremis and sort of finding something and being like, "I hope this helps," what was it about it for you that kept you coming back?

Stella: I'm just going to rewind the clock a little here to when we met, right? It was 2020. And so, of course, nobody wants to drop themselves back into the middle of those days in 2020 when we were on lockdown, right? And most physicians were terrified. Adult physicians were working hard, and many pediatric physicians were... we didn't have a lot that we were doing in person.

The first few weeks and months of the lockdown, we really were showing each other cat videos a lot and doing a lot by phone and saying, "Don't come in. Don't come in. Don't come in for your well checks. If we can handle it without you coming into the office, that's what we want to do."

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And I had been not in a really great state of mind for a while. I'd been fairly burnt out doing complex pediatrics for a while and had had some passive suicidal thoughts. And when something changes that you have no control over, and this is going to happen in life... things are going to happen that we have no control over and they're going to rattle the foundation of your assumptions.

They're going to pull back this veil that we draw over the reality that really there are many things that we don't control, right? We don't necessarily control a lot about our safety and our security and what other people do. And rather than coming to terms with that and making peace with that, my modus operandi at that time was to just kind of say, "I'm not going to think about that."

And so, when this world-shaking event came along, I really did not adjust well to it. And I would look out the window and think, "You know, if I could jump, and be absolutely certain that I wouldn't end up still alive after the jump, that'd be okay. That might be better. Because here I am faced with this reality that I am not in control."

And it's not something that I'd ever really accepted. And the dissatisfaction and sense of helplessness, and the fact that I'd been critical of myself and just lambasting myself and saying horrible things to myself about how this was all my fault, that I wasn't in control, right? It had just built to this fever pitch.

And that leads to trying to avoid all of that, and trying to avoid those thoughts. And so, there I am, I don't know, three in the morning, doom scrolling on social media. And I come across an ad that says, "Respite for women physicians life coaching." And it's this time and it's free.

And I thought, "Any port in a storm. I can always go back to my thoughts about how I can jump out of a window or jump off my second story porch at another time." I went and that was the first time that anyone had pointed out to me that how I think influences what I feel. What I feel influences how

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I think. And both of those things influence my actions and those things create this cycle that can perpetuate, right?

And the first time that someone had ever offered that you could choose a different thought, and had offered a thought that it didn't make everything better, but it did help enough that I was able pick myself up and say, "It isn't normal to think, 'hey, if I could jump from here...' I can reach out to my physician and say, 'I'm not doing well, and I really think I might need an adjustment of my SSRI.'"

And surprisingly, between that and reaching out to my therapist and saying, "I haven't necessarily been honest with you. I've been saying everything's fine. Everything's not fine. I think I might need to bump up frequency," I was really surprised how well this other thought worked in terms of changing my action, which in turn caused this cascade effect of changing how I was feeling somewhat, right?

Was it perfect? No. Was it 100% better? No. Was it 80% better? No. But I was willing to take 20% better, and so I reached back out to the person that ran that seminar and said, "Hey, can I follow you on social media?" Yeah, that was fine. And I said, "So, this stuff seems like it really works." And thank God she did not laugh at me. She's like, "Yep, yep."

I said, "So, do you do this one-on-one?" She said, "Yep, and I have a program." And that's how you and I met. I joined the program, and I was in your small group. And then you began to have a program called Habits on Purpose for Physicians, HOPP. You have had multiple rounds of HOPP and I have been in, I think, five or six of your iterations of HOPP.

And HOPP centers around six months of intentionally looking at making changes. Not to make things necessarily 100% better but to make things 5% better, and then 5% better again, and then 5% better again over a longer period of time. And it's those incremental changes that bring about permanent shifts in the foundation and that lead to an elimination of that adjustment reaction of 'my whole world has been completely shaken.'

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And it doesn't necessarily seem like it, when something happens, until you look back.

Kristi: So, thank you for putting to words your experience in COVID and then what was actually concretely meaningful for you about being in that program. And thank goodness, thank goodness you found that, right? And I do want to emphasize something that you just said, for anybody listening who's familiar or unfamiliar with coaching.

I think there can be a tendency for us to think, especially when we're really undone or we're desperate for something, to either notice that there might be a marketing component or to wish that there's a quick fix out there. We can press a button, everything's just going to be better.

But I love that you pointed out that when we're doing the deeper work and we're doing change, whether it's change from the bottom up, going with our emotions and our bodies, or change from the top down from our thoughts, it's incremental.

There's no easy fix it button that whitewashes things in a way that changes things quickly. It's time.

Stella: I mean, in some ways, I wish, "Gosh, wouldn't it be amazing if it were that, in large part, the cultural lens and the training lens through which so many of us as physicians viewed the world? Wouldn't that be amazing if we could just wipe it all away, right?" And yet, that journey means something.

Kristi: Exactly. It really does. I couldn't have said it better. So, when you're talking about participating in a program and participating in community with other people, doing something such as coaching... which can be almost a recipe for unearthing so many vulnerabilities... I would love it if you could talk a little bit about what your experience is like being in a group with other people, and being a client receiving coaching around other people and also observing other people get coached.

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Stella: As a human being, I'm caught between two impulses. I want to connect with others and I'm afraid of being rejected by others. And I'm not going to speak for anyone else, but for me, these are the two things that are most prominent when I'm in a group program.

“Oh, gosh, here are these people, new people, and I really want to connect with them. I want to find the points of commonality. And what if I'm rejected,” right? And the first thing that I remind myself in any group program is we all came into this program for reasons that are very similar.

We all came in because something about this program speaks to us. And so, no matter what things do or don't seem to be points of commonality, we are all here for the same end goal. And we all are going to be engaging in the same activity or activities.

And when, in a program like HOPP, where a lot of the coaching is going to be either in front of other people in the group, or you are observing someone else be coached, and things are coming up for you, there are two things that I always work hard to keep in the front of my mind.

And the first one is when someone else is being coached, things are going to come up for me. Everything that someone else is being coached on does have pertinence for my life. What someone else is going through, whether the specific instance is similar to my life or not, the emotions of it, the framework of it, the theme of it is a universal human theme. And there's always something in there that is going to be valuable to me as I live my life.

And the second thing is that when I'm up there and I'm being coached, right? And it's always my choice. You can go through the entire HOPP program and choose to not raise your hand and not be coached in front of anyone else. It's my thought that that would be a loss for everyone else, because each of us has a deep richness to our lives that allows everyone else in the group to gain something wonderful and magical from seeing you be coached.

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But when I'm being coached in front of others, that second thing is I get to choose. I get to choose what I want to share. I get to choose how much I want to share. And I get to choose how much I want to trust. I don't have to share anything super sensitive. I can share how annoyed I am that the dog chewed up a slipper and that my husband didn't stop the dog from chewing up a slipper.

Or I can share how I felt like a failure because I didn't finish all of my notes before the end of the day and I stayed until 6.30. I get to choose. I get to filter. And I get to ask for reassurance or reminders that what I'm saying is in fact going to stay within the group.

And the lovely thing is everyone in the group is very well-versed in HIPAA and confidentiality. So, I don't have any fears that people don't understand what confidentiality is and they're kind of saying, "Hey, you know what? I'm going to tell my next-door neighbor that there's this woman named Stella and she was pissed at her husband for letting the dog chew up a slipper and then vomit out the slipper into the other slipper." Right?

Because we all, in that particular group, because it's for physicians, we all know how this works.

Kristi: So, that brings me to, what was it like for you to specifically be around other women physicians as opposed to just another group of professionals or another group of women?

Stella: So, that's the thing about groups of women physicians. There is a specific culture to medicine. We have spent, and I'm going to say this as a female physician... I spent a long time working toward becoming a physician. And then you go through medical school and residency. You take your lumps, you become an attending, you work your butt off.

You're juggling between the unpaid social burdens of being female, doing work at home, doing stuff at work, and honestly, being paid about 19% less than your male counterparts while spending more time in the room with your patients. And there's something about being with other women

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physicians, they get that in deep ways that other professionals might not, right?

So, you can say to a group of women physicians, "It was a really rough day on call," and it allows you to be more... at least, it allows me to be more vulnerable about exactly how and why it was a rough day, than it would be if it was a group of physicians and pharmacists and social workers.

Because someone might say, "Oh, are you on service?" And I'm like, "No, but I was on call and I got hammer-paged from three until five. Some nurse was going through the chart and she found a bunch of restraint orders for May that needed signatures, and decided this was a good time to call and ask me to come into the hospital for that."

And everyone's going to go, "Ugh," even if that's not something they're doing right now. We all have enough understanding from our training and enough of a cultural foundation that's common that we know what that feels like. We know what it feels like to get asked to go way out of our way by someone else in the helping profession, to do something that really is not even our job.

Kristi: There's a shorthand that doesn't have to be explained. I'm not a pharmacist, to use that example, but I would imagine if you have a group of pharmacists together, they have a very similar thing where they get it, right? And there's something really moving about being in a group of people where you can have that sense of psychological safety and commonality; where they just get it.

And I think that really, that paired with radical confidentiality creates the container. A container that's goal is to be deeply safe, where people can be seen and heard and understood. And if you don't have that foundation, it can almost be a little bit of a barrier for doing some of that deeper work that requires feeling safe. So, I have a question for you. Oh, go ahead. What were you going to say?

Stella: It automatically allows for yet another point of commonality. It's not just, "Oh, we're all in this program for the same end goal." But also, I know

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this is somebody who's got much of the same training, has got much of the same foundation. We all have some similar experiences. It does allow for that openness and ease to come a bit more quickly.

Kristi: When I think about this and the importance of having that, where I go is knowing that you've done lots of coaching yourself as a client and you've done lots of coaching of clients.

The thing that I wonder about, are there a few things that stand out for you, in terms of your experience of coaching and what it shifted for you? In terms of maybe your relationships, how you show up at work, your identity with, comfort in your own skin? Are there things that stand out to you as things that because of your experience as a client and as a coach have shifted in your life?

Stella: Absolutely. Gosh, I can't believe it's been four years, a little over four years. My youngest came out as genderqueer in 2020. And shortly after that, my oldest came out of the closet. And for the people who are listening to this, my oldest is someone who has multiple developmental and medical disabilities. We had really been struggling. I had been struggling. I was fighting reality.

And you know what? You can pick a fight with reality, but reality is going to win 100% of the time. I wanted things to be very different than they were. I was prepared to argue up and down that if only my oldest kid would just try harder, that things would be different and that my oldest kid would be more functional. And that's just not what the reality of the situation was or is.

And at the time that I came to coaching, I had very nearly broken my relationship with my oldest kid. I had a very strained relationship with my younger kid, not because of my younger kid being genderqueer, but because I wanted things done exactly the way I wanted them done. And they had to be done right then.

And any deviation from that was proof that somehow I was a bad parent or the kid was a bad kid. And it meant that I had to work harder and they had to work harder. And this was not real great for our relationship.

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Coaching has really been amazing. And full disclosure, it was amazing enough that my younger kid is like, “I need a coach. I want to coach,” and has been engaged in coaching for the last three years with someone and firmly believes that everyone deserves to have a coach.

My older kid is not interested in having a coach, but agrees that everyone who wants one should have a coach. And both of them fully endorse that. They are like, “We like post-coaching mom way better than pre-coaching mom.” And our relationship really has been restored.

It's more than a Buddhist sort of ‘I accept what is.’ It's ‘I love you for who you are. What you do is secondary to your value in my life simply for being who you are.’

The other thing coaching has done for me has been to give me a path back to my spirituality. Because after we had walked away from a church experience that had been quite bad and kind of washed our hands of that. And after being involved with coaching for a while, when you have been able to build enough self-compassion, it becomes easy to offer compassion to others.

And once you can offer compassion to others, you're able to build connections to other people and other communities. And in doing so, spirituality just comes rushing back in. That sense of divinity or Higher Power or the universe being made right again. Name it whatever you want to name it; the Source of creation or Being, God, whatever, or Gods, whatever you want to call it.

When I have compassion for myself, it just can pour out as compassion for others. It allows me to serve others easily, it allows spirit to flow back, and for me to connect in ways that are aligned with my values and that don't feel like ‘I said I'd do this, but I don't want to do this,’ right? It makes it easy and joyful.

And so, I've been volunteering and doing spiritual direction and coaching one to two days a week at a place here in Minneapolis called the Dignity Center, where I'm an advocate for individuals experiencing homelessness.

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And what that means is I sit with people and we work on whatever it is that they want to work on. Their goals are self-directed.

Sometimes I help people fill out applications to go to community college. Sometimes we're working on getting them a county worker. Sometimes they sit and they tell me their stories and I listen. Sometimes they want to chunk down how to do something. And sometimes they just want someone to listen and tell them that they're seen, that it's going to be okay to be seen, that they're not going to be turned away. And sometimes they just want a toothbrush, and it's beautiful.

Kristi: Now hearing that, I just wish people could sort of see the look on your face right now as you're talking about this. You have such a calm, very centered, grounded look to you as you're talking about this. And I just kind of love the narrative of, in my mind, who would have thought during a pandemic and then finding the lovely, empowering women physicians with Sunny Smith, and then finding coaching and working with HOPP and doing individual coaching...

Who would have thought that, fast forward here, these are some of the things that would now be in your life? And some of the things that have shifted with your kiddos and your relationship with them? It's just really beautiful.

Stella: Right? I wouldn't have predicted it. I just wanted the pain to go away. And I would have... If you had told me that day that the way to make the pain go away was to be compassionate toward myself, I couldn't have even heard it, right? And so, if there's somebody out there that's listening, and it's like, "Now this sounds like utter and complete stuff that comes out of the back of a horse," I get it. I get it.

Because I hear this coming out of my mouth and there is a piece of me that's like, "You know what you sound like? You sound like one of those people that does a lot of weed and doesn't bathe very often and eats nothing but granola."

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And yet, all of the richness and joy in life that I'm finding now, I can't trace all of it back to coaching, but so much of it is coming from the employment of these tools. Which have led me back to things that I loved in the past, and forward to new things that I'm finding delight in.

Kristi: I think that going back to yourself is a big thing. And I love that you pointed out the elephant in the room. That a lot of this can seem a little bit too good to be true. And if there is anybody listening here who's kind of bristling at hearing the idea of giving compassion to yourself, I get it too. I mean, I feel like we're all quite good at empathy.

And when it comes to self-compassion, number one, it can sound foreign or weird or strange. And then number two, it can seem inaccessible. Something that maybe other people could do, but not me.

Stella: And it's okay, because that's not where I started. And it's taken four years to get here. And there are still days where I want to sit under my desk because the voice inside of my head is not a very nice one. And it's saying things to me about how I didn't have a full schedule today, so that must mean that nobody likes me as a doctor. Or I'm needing to use a walker today to walk, so I shouldn't be practicing as a physician, right?

And it's okay. Because sometimes the best that we can do is to say, "I hear that thought. That's the thought that I had today. And knowing that was the thought that I had today, I'm going to choose to practice a different thought tomorrow. I might screw it up, but it's like practicing a musical instrument or a tricky pitch, a curve ball or a screwball, or learning to make something new when you're a carpenter, you're going to mess stuff up sometimes."

We're practicing a new thought; not always going to get it right. And that means if I get 5% better or 5% less mean talk in my head tomorrow, 5% less telling myself I don't deserve to be here and I don't deserve to be a medical director, I'm doing pretty good.

Kristi: Such a powerful truth and way of looking at things. For those listening, Stella and I have already decided that there will be a part two sequel where Stella and I are going to talk about Internal Family Systems,

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talk about her journey as a coach and her practice. We'll make sure that you know how to find her.

But Stella, I can't wrap this conversation up without asking you about your experience with Internal Family Systems; with what that's like, what you have found appealing, and why you decided to study it.

Stella: Oh, my goodness. The thing about the mind is it isn't one monolith. And as I learned a very specific CBT, Cognitive Behavioral Therapy based model of coaching, there was always something in me that kind of rebelled a little bit against that.

I think if my parents had ever taken me to be diagnosed, they would have said oppositional defiant disorder for sure. Because I always wanted to say, "But there's always something in opposition to whatever thought I'm having," right? I'm someone that always feels torn or seems to... I always want to present the other point of view as well.

And as coaching led me back towards spirituality, I began to step into this realm of parts-based coaching, which originated in this era with Richard Schwartz and Internal Family Systems. I became more and more interested in Internal Family Systems and ended up getting the level one certification in that.

And the thing that I really love about that is that it acknowledges that human beings can be conflicted. That we can have more than one thought or opinion about something that's happening in our lives. And it allows a little bit of distance from that conflict so that we can mediate that conflict within ourselves in a compassionate way. That allows for us to, as well, acknowledge any trauma that might've happened in the past that might be driving that conflict.

And so, I just love that holistic and, honestly, slightly spiritual aspect to it. And the fact that no matter who you are, there are going to be times when you feel stuck, you can't decide, you're looking at both sides of the situation and you need some technique that helps you to move forward with compassion. Always with compassion.

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Kristi: Let's for sure schedule a time where we can get into some of the nitty gritty of that particular method and technique and paradigm for looking at the world and coaching. For the people who now cannot get enough of this lovely Stella Evans and want to find you, can you tell them how they can find you? How can they get in touch if they want to work with you as a coach or just connect in some way?

Stella: Absolutely. I am in the process of stripping things down and keeping it simple. So, just reach out by email to StellaKEvansMD@gmail.com.

Kristi: Amazing. Everyone who's interested in connecting with Stella, please take advantage, learn from her. She's amazing. And for those of you who like that teaser of knowing that we're going to talk again in the future, stay tuned. That will be so much fun.

Stella, thank you for your time. Thank you for being here and sharing your experience and sharing what coaching's been like for you. It's been a delight.

Stella: Oh, so much love to you, Kristi.

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.