

Ep #163: How to Change Deeply Ingrained Habits Using IFS



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kristi Angevine

[Habits On Purpose](#) with Kristi Angevine

Ep #163 : How to Change Deeply Ingrained Habits Using IFS

Welcome to Episode #163 of *Habits on Purpose*. I'm your host, Kristi Angevine, and this podcast is your invitation to deepen your understanding of why you think, feel, and act as you do, so that you can stop habits that take more than they give and replace them with ones that actually serve you.

Today's episode tackles a really important and often misunderstood fundamental topic related to habits, why we repeat habits, even when we want to stop them. So if you've ever thought, why do I keep doing this? Or why can't I just have more willpower and finally change this? This episode is made for you. Let's dive in.

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, everyone. I have wondered why we do what we do since I was younger than I can remember. But my passion to understand habituated patterns, it began later in life, and specifically it started when I was coaching physicians on their coping habits. And these were coping habits that they did not like and they really wanted to change. Things like overeating, over drinking, over-scrolling, over-working, over-shopping. And as I studied more and as I learned from my clients, I began to really appreciate that the habit that somebody would present with as the thing that they most wanted to change was actually never what the focus of their exploration became.

Clients that were grappling with leaning on a glass of wine to wind down from work would end up finding habits behind their drinking. Things like, for example, second-guessing or compare-and-despair that were the habits that actually drove the habit of wanting a drink. Clients that were trying to change their habit of overeating or emotional eating would surprise themselves when they would find the habit of compartmentalizing or

Ep #163 : How to Change Deeply Ingrained Habits Using IFS

suppressing anger or perfectionism that was buried underneath this habit of eating. And time and time again, people would say things like, I have tried all things to change, blah-biddy-blah habit. I have tried rules, or points, or Weight Watchers, or a dry January, or a limit on my shopping, or a screen time lock, or a lock box for my phone, but none of it seems to stick. And then when they would unravel whatever habits were behind the original habit, that's when they would more easily create the change they wanted.

So why would this happen? Why is this the case? Well, that's what this episode is gonna dive into. So let me explain and share so that you can ensure that your own focus on whatever you'd like to make changes with is not too superficial.

So for those of you who are new to the podcast, I just wanna give you a big welcome and emphasize to you that on this podcast, one of my big goals is to make sure that you not only have good solid frameworks for intellectually understanding something, but that you also have a bridge so you can practically apply things in your everyday life.

Because what is extra knowledge if we don't know how to implement it and we don't know how to use it in just ordinary everyday situations? So as you listen to this, I want you to sort of consider the ways that what I'm talking about applies to you. So that way, at the very end of the podcast, when I give you some concrete things you can do, you'll already have some things in mind.

When it comes to how we think about habits, we tend to assume that our habits stick around because we lack discipline, we don't have enough motivation, or maybe we're just not wired to be consistent. But the truth is, every deeply ingrained habit, no matter how frustrating it is, exists for a really good reason. And what's that reason? Well, there's some kind of benefit baked in every habit. Even if there seems to be more of a downside than an upside, there's always something that the habit is providing. And until we uncover what that benefit is, simply trying to force a new behavior is not going to work in the long term.

Ep #163: How to Change Deeply Ingrained Habits Using IFS

So this is how I think about habits. Every habit we have is a learned solution, an adaptation or strategy that worked and made sense in the context where it developed, even if it no longer works as well now. So let's pan back and discuss why our habits develop, how they function, and then how to start shifting them without relying on hacks, cognitive reframes, discipline, or willpower.

So here's why we have habits. We don't just randomly develop habits. They start as a solution to a problem. They emerge as an adaptive strategy. They are ways that we learn to navigate discomfort or stress, anxiety, or uncertainty. And some of our habitual strategies, they serve us well. Others, not so much. But regardless of if they serve us really well or only a little bit, all of our strategies, all of our habits made sense at one point in time.

So think about a habit like perfectionism. If you grew up feeling like mistakes meant failure or rejection, being perfect might have been your way to avoid criticism or avoid judgment, or perhaps procrastination, maybe putting things off helped you escape the stress of starting something that you weren't sure you could do perfectly, or overeating and over shopping.

These may have developed as a way to soothe feeling agitated and worried. Maybe over-drinking developed as a way to curtail shame, social anxiety, and second-guessing when it came to academics. These habits don't exist because you're broken or uniquely defective. They exist because they worked in some beneficial way when they initially formed. And now you just may notice that they're not working as well as you'd like.

So most habits fall into one of two categories, proactive or reactive. So let's talk about proactive first. Proactive or preventative habits. These are designed to keep you from ever feeling bad in the first place. So perfectionism in an effort to prevent feelings of inadequacy, over preparing or catastrophizing in order to ensure that you never feel caught off guard, criticizing yourself and beating yourself up to make sure that you get there before somebody else does.

Ep #163 : How to Change Deeply Ingrained Habits Using IFS

Then reactive or self-soothing habits. These are habits that kick in when discomfort has already showed up in your life. For example, stress eating to numb anxiety, over drinking to quiet self-doubt, scrolling on your phone when you don't know what to say in a conversation. Now, most of us have a mix of both types of habits. We work really hard to prevent discomfort, but when it inevitably shows up, we turn to something that is self-soothing to make it go away.

So why do surface-level habit changes not last? If you have ever tried to break a habit, particularly a deeply ingrained one, with reframing things with a different way of looking at things, coming up with new thoughts to practice, using self-discipline or willpower, you probably know how frustrating it can be.

Let's say you decide you're gonna cut out sugar or you're gonna decrease eating sweets. You make a plan, you stock up on all these healthy snacks, and you write down your commitment and all the reasons why this matters to you. And you're going along okay, but then you have a stressful day that hits. And before you know it, you're eating cookies straight from the package as you drive home. Why? Well, sugar wasn't the real problem. The problem was, underneath the sugar was stress, and sugar solved for the stress.

So if sugar is your way of coping with stress, taking away the sugar without addressing the stress leaves you sort of standing on a very wobbly surface. You really don't have much there except your stress. If you try to change over drinking at social events without addressing the underlying cause of, say, inadequacy and anxiety that the alcohol helps you with, you're not gonna be able to sip mocktails for long.

Or if you try to shift perfectionistic charting, but you don't target the fear of failure that's underneath, you might be able to hang with doing B minus charting for a week or so before you slip back into your old ways. This is why with deeply ingrained habits, surface level hacks only work temporarily. If the underlying need is not addressed, the habit is gonna find its way back.

Ep #163 : How to Change Deeply Ingrained Habits Using IFS

Now, even ideas that suggest that we can execute a behavioral change by working on our identity can sometimes be a bit problematic, and let me explain why. Say you wanna change the habit of pressing snooze and not getting out of bed to exercise when you made a plan the night before to exercise. And to do so, you start reminding yourself that you are no longer a person who hates exercise, you're no longer a person who's not a morning person, but you are a morning person who values and commits to exercise no matter what. You are an exerciser. And as you tell yourself this, you envision what you'll do with this new identity. And you start taking steps towards reinforcing it. You don't press snooze, you say, you know what? As an exerciser, I get out of bed even when I don't want to. You get out of bed, you go to the gym, and you keep doing this for a bit.

So let me explain why this isn't the most useful approach. In this example, what's the reason for not wanting to go to the gym in the first place? How come it would make sense to press snooze? Well, for one person, they might literally just be sleep deprived. For another person, they might have mom guilt or dad guilt for leaving their kids early in the morning, not spending time with them at breakfast, and not seeing them before they go to school.

For another, it's the mirrors at the gym and that whole weight room scene makes a part of them feel really self-conscious and they would just rather not be around that. Then for another person, maybe they struggled with disordered eating or orthorexia in the past and they worry that they're gonna resume their old ways, that it's a slippery slope as soon as they start getting up every morning to exercise, boom, they're gonna be right back to where they were.

So the surface habit of pressing snooze can happen for so many different, deeper reasons. And therefore, the approach to change will have very different components for each person. So if everybody was just to say, "I am now an exerciser," and try to execute behaviors based on an identity shift that doesn't actually look at what was creating the previous identity

Ep #163: How to Change Deeply Ingrained Habits Using IFS

and the downstream behaviors, it will also run the risk of being a temporary change.

So the bottom line with changing deeply ingrained habits is that it does not require motivation, willpower, or self-discipline. What it does call on is making sure you are addressing what you're left with when your habit is no longer providing a solution.

Now, quick side note here. Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar. And sometimes, below a habit is not much. So below the habit of eating chocolate after every meal might not be anything complex. And your habit of eating chocolate after every meal might simply have been one that grew from convenience, proximity, and something light like a little bit of boredom when you were on a very long vacation visiting somebody who just happened to keep chocolate bowls filled to the brim in every single room of the house.

In a situation like this, you might be able to do a very surface-level intervention where you just simply decide, you know what? I am maxed out on chocolate, and this frequency of chocolate is just not what I wanna do anymore, and I'm done. And while this is possible with many habits, it is not the norm. But I do wanna name that there are some habits that do not have these fascinating and intricately deep reasons driving them.

Let's talk about a practical and simple way of seeing them that does not shut the door on finding root causes. Now, remember, I referred to habits as proactive and preventative versus reactive and soothing habits. And these two categories are gonna make even more sense when we discuss the intersection of Internal Family Systems, the model in psychotherapy, where it meets habits.

So Internal Family Systems gives a deeper understanding by bringing in what I call the triad of habits. Now, if I say IFS, or Internal Family Systems, and this is a new idea to you, you are welcome to continue listening. But if you want some background information to give you some of the

Ep #163: How to Change Deeply Ingrained Habits Using IFS

fundamental principles of this idea, there are several episodes that we will link in the show notes.

But if you are somebody who retains numbers very easily, I will rattle them off here. You can check out episodes 49, 75 and 79, 134, 138. And then the most recent three are 144, 145, and 146. So you can check those out to get some of the basic understanding of IFS.

Now, this model in psychotherapy explains that your mind is made up of different aspects or parts, and that these parts, interestingly, behave kind of like people do. So you might have a part that is very health conscious and interested in nutrition and exercise, while concurrently you have another part of you that thinks that rules are dumb and likes to eat Little Debbie's and avoid going to the gym at all costs. You might have a part that is really playful and goofy and kind of childlike and likes doing impersonations, alongside a very professional part that keeps things ironed, buttoned, tucked in and is very serious. So if you can relate to having different parts of you, you will probably relate to IFS.

Now, the connection between this multiplicity of parts and habits lies in the categories of parts that develop from our life experiences. So if we've had a life experience that was difficult, where we felt alone or ashamed or inadequate or rejected, especially if we were very young and maybe didn't understand exactly what was going on around us or exactly why it happened, we may develop a part that holds on to that discomfort, holds on to a certain kind of self-talk or inner narrative and holds on to the painful beliefs that stemmed from that experience.

In Internal Family Systems, these parts are called exile parts. And they often hold beliefs like I'm bad, I'm not good enough, I'm too much, I'm not enough, and emotions like shame, fear, rejection, powerlessness, humiliation, et cetera.

Then there are protector parts. Protector parts are parts of us that develop in response to the existence of these exile parts. Our protectors can be proactive or reactive. The proactive parts are called manager parts and

Ep #163: How to Change Deeply Ingrained Habits Using IFS

they are parts that try to prevent us from feeling pain. Think perfectionism and overpreparing.

The reactive parts are called firefighters and these are parts that step in whenever our discomfort isn't prevented and they come in to soothe. So think numbing behaviors like scrolling, overeating, and overdrinking. So we have exiles that are the parts of us that hold the most painful feelings, beliefs, and experiences, which are exiled to the deepest recesses of our psyche, out of sight, out of mind. Kind of like existing in the basement or storehouse of our system, who ideally don't get activated and come out and flood us with their painful burdens, particularly not at inconvenient times.

In response to the existence of these exiled parts and burdens and emotions, we have protector parts. The proactive protectors are called managers, and these parts of us work to prevent painful feelings. And the reactive parts are called firefighters who swoop in to soothe when a painful emotion happens despite the best efforts of our coping strategies from the managers.

And you can kind of playfully imagine managers might be like a part that can hold a clipboard and check things off and make sure everything is right. And a firefighter could literally look like a firefighter swooping in to douse the flames of a painful emotion, regardless of the consequences. Just like a real life firefighter would knock down the door and doesn't care about the art, doesn't care about the furniture. The goal is just to get the fire out.

Now, what I've come to appreciate is that our habits are ways of thinking. They are collections of beliefs and rules, emotions and behaviors, that arise from the protective parts in our system that are endeavoring to keep us from feeling something painful, and ensure that our system isn't destabilized by a very exquisitely uncomfortable emotion or painful belief housed in exile.

So let me give you an example to make this sort of theoretical construct more clear. If I wanna avoid feeling shame or failure or avoid really believing that I am bad and I'm incapable, I might have a habit that

Ep #163: How to Change Deeply Ingrained Habits Using IFS

proactively tries to prevent this by being perfectionistic, focusing on details, making sure I never leave anything that is anywhere near imperfect. I might be a control enthusiast, and this might lead me to delay starting things until everything is just right, until I understand everything completely, which leads me to procrastinate. I don't get much done. I have lots of analysis paralysis. But when I do follow through on things, I actually get them done, they are going to be amazing. And my prevention strategy, it's fine, unless it's got me chronically running late, struggling to make decisions, taking forever to do things, et cetera, et cetera.

Now, say something happens, and my boss sends me an e-mail, and the e-mail says, can we talk tomorrow after work? And instantly, I feel a flash of shame, and before you know it, I'm scrolling on my phone, and when I go home, I'm drinking more than I planned, I eat a box of Girl Scout cookies, even though I'm full, and I've also purchased a few more things from Amazon that I wasn't planning on.

If we were to break this down using the language of parts and thinking about habits, we would see an exile that holds shame or failure or inadequacy, a manager that is the detail-oriented perfectionist part that values control and perfection, and a firefighter part that shows up when the best laid plans from my type A manager team fall apart and shame floods me without warning.

Now, if I don't realize if there's an inadequacy or a fear of failing or a shame underneath my perfectionistic ways, or behind my overeating and over shopping, I'm gonna see procrastination, my perfectionism and my soothing coping habits as things that I just need to extinguish as opposed to adaptations that are related to something that is more of a core issue underneath.

So what's the real key to lasting change of entrenched habits? Again, it is not willpower. It is not the perfect habit change system. Rather, it's understanding if our habits are proactive or reactive and then understanding what they are solving for or protecting us from.

Ep #163 : How to Change Deeply Ingrained Habits Using IFS

So what I wanna invite you to reflect on this week is, what could be going on underneath the surface of your habits? I wanna invite you to be a detective and to see what is hidden from the eye. And to do this, first, you identify your proactive and your reactive habits.

Then, consider if some of your repetitive triggers, those events where you just find yourself out of the blue, having a huge emotion that may or may not be commensurate with the situation at hand. See if some of those repetitive triggering emotions and instances might perhaps connect to parts of you that hold pain or hold really limiting beliefs that came from difficult experiences in your past.

Now, let me just give you some examples so you kind of know what you're looking for. Proactive habits from proactive parts can include, but are in no way limited to things like people-pleasing, perfectionism, second-guessing, being compliant and diplomatic, and a good student, overextending, always saying yes, and beating yourself up. Reactive, self-soothing habits from reactive firefighter parts include, but aren't limited to things like overeating, over-drinking, compulsive shopping, cleaning, working, exercise, screen use, picking, checking out, dissociating, escapist reading, escapist TV, et cetera.

So if you take one thing away from this episode, let it be this question. With any deeply ingrained habits, ask yourself, what is really going on here? And the next time you notice yourself people-pleasing, second-guessing, mindlessly shopping, procrastinating, eating more chocolate chips than you planned, scrolling, avoiding, pause and ask yourself, am I preventing something uncomfortable? Am I reacting to something I'm already feeling that I don't like? What's actually bothering me in this moment? And these questions can help you uncover what is underneath your surface habit.

So your invitation this week is quite simple. Notice your habits. Ask yourself, are they proactive? Are they reactive? And what's really going on? And as you do this, you're gonna start uncovering below the surface what's at the heart of what's driving some of your habits. Because when you can find what's at the heart of an issue and put your efforts on addressing that,

Ep #163: How to Change Deeply Ingrained Habits Using IFS

changing some of the more surface level behaviors becomes so much easier.

So if this episode resonates with you, I would love to hear from you. You can connect by going to habitsonpurpose.com and joining the e-mail list, or you can leave a review, share this episode with a friend. And if you're interested in coaching or you wanna take this deeper in a small group coaching program, you can learn more at habitsonpurpose.com and you can learn more about the small group coaching program that's opening up here in the next few months at habitsonpurpose.com/hopp, that's H-O-P-P. I'll talk to you next week.

Are you a woman physician interested in being more intentional in your life, being more deliberate with your habits? Maybe you're feeling a bit frayed on the edges with all the pressures of work and life, and you may have a tendency to overthink, people please, second guess, or feel so much guilt when you do something for yourself.

Perhaps your charting takes forever, you bring work home, and you're just not as present as you would like to be. Maybe you scroll, or shop, or emotionally eat, or you use a drink to wind down more often than you'd like.

If you can relate to this and you just want to feel less reactionary and more in the driver's seat of your life, you need to understand the root causes of your habits. Habits like perfectionism, a harsh inner critic, people pleasing, numbing, ruminating, overcomplicating, procrastinating, and so on.

And that's exactly what you can work on in the next round of small group coaching called *Habits on Purpose for Physicians*. *Habits on Purpose for Physicians*, or *HOPP* for short, comes with CME and is a small group of women physicians who meet weekly for six months.

And in *HOPP*, you get practical, deep dive coaching and teaching from me. And I come at this from a perspective of cognitive, somatic, and Internal Family Systems informed approaches in a way that is not only accessible, but applicable to real life.

Ep #163: How to Change Deeply Ingrained Habits Using IFS

And you get a ready-made structure that you don't have to create on your own, and you get probably one of the best parts is a community where you can connect with other physicians doing the same work.

Enrollment information and the link to join the waitlist can be found at <https://habitsonpurpose.com/hopp>. And when you go there, get on the waitlist, because when you're on the waitlist, you'll get access to early enrollment and some bonuses only available to those who sign up early. And the reason why this is important is spots are limited. So signing up sooner as opposed to later is really smart so you can ensure that you get a spot before they're full.

Also, if you are interested and you want to join but you find the price is a barrier, there are scholarship options so don't hesitate to fill out the easy application for either a partial or a full scholarship that will ultimately be linked on the main sign-up page when we open up enrollment.

In the *Habits on Purpose for Physicians* group, you will unpack and unlearn old habits so that you can create new ones that are sustainable. So I hope you'll consider joining. The signup page with all the details will come out closer to enrollment for the next round, but go to <https://habitsonpurpose.com/hopp> to get on the waitlist. I can't wait to see you there.

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.