

Ep #167 : The Unburdened System: Healing the Root Causes of Your Habits



Full Episode Transcript

With Your Host

Kristi Angevine

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Welcome to Episode #167. I'm your host, Kristi Angevine, and this podcast is here to help you understand why you think, feel, and act as you do, so you can shift the habits that take more than they give into habits that are deliberate and intentional.

Today's episode is a much-needed dose of encouragement and hope about what could be possible when the root causes for your habits are addressed in a really thorough way. 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 everybody. Well, one of the things that occurred to me as I sat down to record this is I was watching a TV show with my kids and one of them said something about, "Gosh, Mom, wouldn't it be so cool to be a detective?" And we started talking about some of the, you know, the pros and cons of being an actual detective. And it made me think that one of the things that I really, really loved about some of my clinical practice days was the detective work, the investigation, the diagnosing, the solving. I really enjoyed that. You'd start with a mystery and you'd ask some questions, you'd investigate, and most of the time you'd come up with what was going on. And there was something just really, really fun about that.

And so we talked about how you can be a detective in lots of different jobs, not just being a formal detective. And it made me think about how I really do consider myself, you know, I would call myself a fixer. I love to play detective. I love to find solutions. I love to work out the answer to puzzles. It's enjoyable. And what I notice is in my life, I find myself naturally gravitating towards problems and trying to understand them. I notice problems. I want to figure them out. I want to help them. I want to figure out how to navigate the difficulties that I'm facing.

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And my sort of inner sleuth and the fixer in me really loves that I do focus on some problems. And yet, this bias towards the negative isn't always the best. But my bias towards the negative, it's definitely not unique. It's human nature to preferentially notice and spend time on and emphasize the negative. So while my inner sleuth and fixer really loves and thrives on focusing on the negative and the problems to kind of figure it out, sometimes that type of focus can take its toll.

Now, it's not necessarily a problem. But when there's a dominant focus on problems, it can be very easy to overlook positive things. Very easy to forget what good is possible. And this phenomenon plays out when we spend the majority of our time exploring pain points and hardly any time on what could be possible when our old coping strategies, the habits that we don't like, when these things shift. What could be possible when our system sheds some of the really heavy burdens that we've been slogging around?

So this episode is all about bringing in a really nice ray of sunshine, a bright spot to inspire you. And the way I'm going to do this is I'm going to describe the Unburdened System as represented in a really beautiful mandala created by Mariel Pastor. And this is my way of giving you a bit of a north star for what things could look like and feel like when your old habits transform, when you learn how to relate to yourself with a kindness and care, and when you uncover the gifts that are inside all of the many parts that make up your internal system.

Now, if you are a new listener, or if you're a long time listener, but we just really haven't delved into Internal Family Systems on the episodes you've listened to, please feel free to listen to this episode and just know that there may be some terminology that just might not make sense. But if you'd like to get a foundation for some of the basics that explain Internal Family Systems, I encourage you to go back to Episode #75. And then also Episode #163 does a really good job of explaining Internal Family Systems and how you can use it for sort of addressing some of your deeply

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ingrained habits. So check out Episode #75 first and then come back to this one.

So let me just begin this episode by naming that sometimes what is so very helpful is when we realize what's actually hard compared to what we think will be hard. So say you're learning an instrument and you're learning how to read music. At first glance of a piece that you're about to play, you might think, oh, this part of the song is going to be the hardest. But a seasoned teacher can look over your shoulder and say, "Oh, hey, what's actually going to be the hard part of this song is this other thing. It's getting your hand over to this note on time."

And that tip from somebody who knows what they're doing can help us know what we should actually pay attention to, the thing that actually might be the hardest as we're approaching something. So knowing what is actually the most difficult is extremely helpful, not only in learning new things like an instrument, but also in our personal growth, our personal exploration. So for many of us, sometimes it seems like the hardest part when we are addressing things inside our own system is being with hard emotions, being with suffering, being with your own suffering, the suffering of others. The hardest part is not rushing to solve or escape the things that make you feel totally undone, but just witnessing and being with the hard parts.

But here's what I've noticed. The actual act and process of being with suffering and difficult emotions isn't actually as hard as we think it might be. Being with the suffering, that's not the hard part. What's actually hard is the prospect of being stuck with or forever engulfed by the suffering, believing that there may be no point to doing this work, and essentially being without hope. So I want to bring you a dose of hope for what's available as you make microscopic or seismic shifts when it comes to changing your habits.

So this dose of hope comes in the form of the Unburdened System as illustrated by Mariel Pastor's mandala. She created this in conjunction with

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Dick Schwartz for communicating some very key features to Internal Family Systems. And I'll link her contact info in the show notes so that you can see the actual illustration and read her text, but you can find her at marielpastor.com.

So this illustration shows what's possible when the parts of our system that are burdened shift into new roles and are unburdened. So first, let's just pause for a second. What does that even mean? What does it mean for burdened parts to shift into new roles? Say you've got a part of you that feels really inadequate, and like this part feels like it doesn't belong. The inadequacy and the isolation are burdens. Burdens are essentially painful emotions or beliefs that we took on after we went through something really difficult in life. Perhaps where something was too much, too fast, or we experienced something all alone, where there was not somebody to come in and explain what was happening to us or contextualize the experience for us.

So the part of you that feels like it doesn't belong is most likely usually boxed up deep in your psyche. So the way this would look is you've got a good poker face, and you know how to make small talk. And from the outside, nobody would look at you and guess that you have a part that feels like you don't belong. This part stays out of sight, out of mind. Because other parts of you have become really good at preventing the feeling of inadequacy and preventing the sense of not belonging. Parts of you might strive to get awards and recognition and prestigious positions. You might have parts that work really hard to make sure you don't disappoint people. Or a part might be very type A and make sure that you never miss any detail.

And these parts basically work really, really, really hard to ensure that you never feel inadequate and you never again feel like you're not welcomed or you don't belong. So these parts in our system, these proactive helper parts, a phrase that I really love and first learned from Ashley Booth. These parts, they don't necessarily do this work just for fun. They do this job to

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make sure that that part that really craves belonging and reassurance, that that part doesn't get activated. They work very hard to prevent any feelings of exclusion, rejection, unworthiness, and not belonging.

And in this way, these prevention focused and very proactive parts, they are also burdened. They're likely doing a job because they don't feel like they have a choice. It's not like it's their preferred or spontaneously desired job. And we know this to be the case by the underbelly that will come when these parts dominate your system. So what does this look like? Well, perfectionism never lets you savor the journey or enjoy your accomplishments. Nothing is ever quite good enough. No matter how much you achieve, deep down, you believe you should be better. There's a rigidity to the high achievement orientation.

Parts seeking external validation and accolades, they can leave you exhausted, overworking, unable to say no, unable to get rest. People pleasing parts might be excellent at tending to the needs of others. But where does that leave you? Nowhere on your list, right? You can't rest, you can't play, you can't do anything for you until the needs of others are all completely met. Parts that work hard to ensure that you appear to have it all together. These parts, they keep you from ever asking for help because goodness gracious, if you were ever seen as a failure in the eyes of others, that would be unacceptable. So that leaves you completely frayed, running on fumes.

And then when the best efforts of these proactive helpers, when that's not enough and something happens that has you just feeling completely left out, like you don't belong anywhere, fully incapable, totally unworthy, you're likely going to have some reactive helper parts, which is another phrase from Ashley Booth. Reactive helper parts or firefighter parts that show up to douse the flames of intense emotion. Reactive helper parts, they will do whatever it takes to soothe intense pain. Maybe it's TV or alcohol or sugar or playing Candy Crush or shopping or exercise or stress cleaning. Maybe

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it's feeling really foggy and a bit dissociated, and kind of like reality is a bit arms length.

Reactive helpers, they have the power of a tidal wave. And yet, often these parts, similar to the proactive helpers, they have a job that exists purely because of the burden of not belonging that that other part carries. If that part wasn't a risk of getting triggered, the reactive part likely would go do something else. And this is how these parts behave when they are burdened.

So I want you to take a minute and just imagine in this situation, the part with the unmet need, the part that just longs to belong, and wishes it felt adequate. And then these parts that are working so hard to either prevent or to soothe, imagine that they were no longer burdened with the feeling of not belonging. This would be the unburdened state. When we actually get to the root of why we do everything and we can heal that root cause and we release a belief like I'm not enough, I'm unwelcome. We end up being left with a part that is unburdened.

It's almost like if we took a heavy backpack off of somebody who is tasked with bringing a backpack and delivering it to another person. And we said, "Hey, we got the backpack." And we delivered the backpack to where it was supposed to go. The person acting as a sherpa might decide to go do something else with their time and energy now that they're no longer burdened with that heavy load. And this is what happens with our inner parts as well.

If a part holding pain, feeling like it doesn't belong, can release that pain, that part can shift into doing something else. And what we find is that parts, just like people, when they're not doing a job that's really, really difficult, when they're not doing a job that takes more than it gives, we can actually appreciate strengths and gifts, lots of wisdom. And the wisdom and gifts are simply obscured when the burdens are there.

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So the analogy I like for this is to imagine that somebody is amazing at dance. But they work a job that has really long hours, and all their time and effort goes into analyzing spreadsheets. And if they believe that they must analyze spreadsheets 60, 70, 80 hours a week or else something terrible will happen, they are for sure going to ignore their natural talent. They're not going to go dancing, and they are going to ignore that until the more critical task is done. And we would never know about the dancing skill unless they no longer were compelled to be this number cruncher.

So in an inner system, when a core part of us is carrying a negative belief that pertains to our identity and intensely painful experiences and feelings, this part is burdened. When it is unburdened, there's a domino effect, and all the helper parts in our system also can be unburdened. Then all the parts can shift into doing something that's more in line with their natural strengths, their natural gifts and preferences.

So let me give you a quick example. If somebody has a burden of shame and a sharp inner critic that pushes them to work harder and do more and they constantly second guess and compare themselves to others, they ruminate, and then to shut their mind off at night so they can actually stop thinking about work and be more present with the people they love, they have a few beers while they make dinner. And then when everybody else has gone to bed, they spend two or three or four hours just scrolling Instagram reels just to numb the chatter.

And if we think about it, this person, they don't need a screen time limit. They don't need to stop buying beer. What they need is to heal the part that holds the shame. When that part is witnessed and healed, the part of them that would second-guess to avoid messing up. Well, it doesn't need to do that job anymore. That part might shift into asking bold questions or help them think outside the box. Their inner critic turns into their inner cheerleader. The compare and despair department. Well, now decisively knows how to ask for help when needed. Instead of numbing with alcohol and a screen, this part astutely identifies and pursues activities that they

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find deeply pleasurable. So now they take piano lessons, and they can lose themselves for hours in the pleasure of learning new songs.

So I want you to take a minute for yourself and think, what might it be like for you if some of your most limiting, painful beliefs, some of your most difficult, heavy emotions that you hold. What would it be like if those shifted? What would it do for your habits? What would it do for your identity?

So let's check in and kind of pan back and talk about the entirety of an Unburdened System as Mariel Pastor describes. When unburdened, these parts bring openness, trust, and almost like a permeability to be able to perceive the world in all of its complexity. Instead of insecurity, there's intuition. Instead of disconnection and not belonging, there can be the ease of reaching out to others. Kind of like you see with like little kids who are playing, who have no qualms about just going up and sitting down and saying, "Hey, do you want to play?" There can be delight and this effervescent joy, and perhaps genuine curiosity. You know, the type that comes when you're really at ease with knowing what you don't know.

How about the protective parts in our system? The managers, the firefighters, those proactive and reactive helpers. What are they like when they're unburdened? Well, let's just keep in mind, proactive helper parts. These parts are all about prevention. And when they are burdened, these are the parts of us that show up to people please, to accommodate, to perfect our appearance. They are diplomatic, perfectionistic, they're all about getting lots of tasks done. And when these parts are unburdened, they may not show up with so much rigidity and tension. Instead of, I must be productive, I must be perfect, or else. These parts can become our visionaries and sources of encouragement. They can approach everyday life in a less extreme way than when they're burdened. They can be confident and collaborative and creative. They can have an eye for really interesting solutions.

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This is where you feel highly productive and highly attuned in a way that's kind of more parental, like a wise coach instead of a drill sergeant. Now let's talk about unburdened reactive helpers or unburdened firefighter parts. These parts can shift from sensing the faintest whiff of distress and then shutting it down, to alerting us to the need to slow down and rest. These parts might offer nourishing distractions, excellent self-care, self-soothing that's healthy, grounding when life gets a bit crazy. These parts can shift from being sort of the source of all rage and blame to bringing a beautiful sensitivity to injustice, paired with the wisdom and courage to speak up and advocate for change. They may help us start a conversation when it would be easier not to, or bring in humor as a way to connect. They may be sensual instead of escapist, or bring healthy risk-taking instead of dangerous risk-taking.

And when the system as a whole is unburdened, we just generally feel more spacious, more open, and more present. And to paraphrase Mariel Pastor, in an Unburdened System, a person looks and acts comfortable in her own being, interacting with others from integrated parts and awareness. Parts will work harmoniously together with fewer burdens causing them to overreact. Many parts may be released from their protective roles while others will effectively protect only when needed. And over time, the person is less easily destabilized and better able to recover from challenges in general. The inherent gifts of each part are more available, weaving in and out consciously. A self-led person brings an abiding sense of curiosity, acceptance, and open-heartedness to their relationships.

Now, as an aside, when we talk about burdened and unburdened, this isn't all or none. Burdened and unburdened, they exist on a continuum. So I'm curious when you hear about the Unburdened System, even though it may be a little bit abstract, I'm curious how it feels to imagine the parts of you that currently drive your peskiest habits. Like the most soul sucking repeat patterns. What's it like for you to imagine them retiring from their exhausting job and doing something else? If when you listen to this, you felt some sort

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of lightness or hope, maybe some warmth or optimism, I want you to take a minute and just bask in that. See if you can maybe extend some of that to any of the nooks and crannies in your system that just might need it.

If, on the other hand, you feel skeptical or maybe a little discouraged, that is also welcome. Sometimes, parts of us worry that something can be too good to be true. And that if we open up to it, we're just going to be even more disappointed when it doesn't ever happen. Or we might feel like, well, heck, it might be a possibility for somebody, but it's not a possibility for me. And if this is you, here is my invitation.

First of all, you don't have to buy into any of this. You do not need to take my word for any of it. But if it feels available to you, maybe just wonder, what would be the risk of considering this possibility of your parts shifting into different jobs, of unburdening some of the most painful emotions and beliefs. And what might change if you knew it were actually possible?

Now, let's take a second and tie this back to habits and the habits that you might really want to change. People often ask, what is the most effective way to change a habit? How long does it take? What are the steps? Who makes the best habit tracker? Should I stop buying chocolate? Should I set my gym clothes out or wear them to bed? How about a screen time limit on my phone? And what's going to maximize my chances of success? How do I stay motivated? Well, all these questions are very valid, but here's all you really need to know. Habits that take more than they give are the product of a burdened set of parts. They are the modern-day manifestation of some coping that was once adaptive and is now maladaptive. In contrast, habits that are life-giving and intentional and give more than they take, these habits are the product of an unburdened set of parts.

So, for any repetitive pattern that you have, you can just know that that pattern is likely some form of a proactive strategy or reactive way of coping with something that's more tender. So to get at the root cause of the habit itself, so that you can change the habit, whether it's fretting over your outfit

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choice or procrastination, or feeling really uncomfortable and not voicing what you need, or a really relentless, sharp inner critic. The work before you will likely involve befriending your parts, learning the real reason why they do what they do, finding out what tenderness they're working on behalf of, and then doing the work of unburdening the whole crew of parts.

Now, as you can imagine, this is not some overnight process. It's slow and it's slower than many of my parts would like, but it's the pace that's required. Kind of like the amount of time it takes for a peach to ripen. It cannot be rushed, and the same applies here. So if you are currently feeling like you are up to your eyeballs in challenge, permission granted to just have a little fun. Imagine what alternate jobs your biggest parts might shift into if, hypothetically, they were willing to. If the thing that they are concerned about the most wasn't at stake, wasn't a risk, if we could guarantee that their biggest fear was not going to happen. Say, what would your inner critic prefer to do? How about the part of you that tends to others at your own expense? What would all these really hard-working parts want to do instead of what they're doing now?

I hope you enjoyed hearing about the Unburdened System, and you can reflect on what this might look like for you and for your parts. If you like this episode, please follow the podcast. Take an extra step and rate it, leave a review, even just a phrase or a sentence or two. And if you really liked it, feel free to share this episode in your community, whether you are on social media or by email. These things would mean so much to me. Thank you so much for listening, and I will 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.

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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.

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.

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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.