

Ep #171: Decode Your Urges: The Hidden Messages Behind Impulsive Behaviors



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With Your Host

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Do you ever feel like your urges, whether it's to overeat, overdrink, overwork, check out with your phone, are just signs of weakness or lack of willpower? Do you try to push them away, override them, or power through? But they just keep coming back. What if I told you your urges aren't actually problems to fix, but messengers to listen to?

Welcome to Habits on Purpose. I'm your host, Physician, Master Certified Life Coach and IFS Practitioner, Kristi Angevine. Let's get started.

Hello, hello everybody. So, it's just hit me recently that I have been doing this podcast for about 3 years now, which as I say that means I have forgotten to celebrate a milestone 3-year-old birthday party. But over that period of time, I have learned so much that has really shaped and changed my perspective. And while some of the fundamental ideas haven't changed much, I now understand some of these fundamentals in a very different way. I teach them differently, I apply them in my life differently.

So, in some upcoming episodes, I'm going to revisit some of these fundamental topics and explore these earlier episodes of the podcast with the new understanding and new information that I have, and how I now teach them differently.

The other day, I was actually teaching a class and somebody said, "Episode such and such was exactly what they needed to hear." And my answer to them was, "That episode was actually probably exactly what I needed to hear at the time, too." When I do these episodes, so often, they are the very thing that either I wish I'd known, the thing that I really need to hear, or something that the reason I'm able to write about it or talk about it is because I've gone through the very problem that's at the crux of it.

So, if you are new to this podcast and this is one of your early episodes, or maybe even your first episode, I'm so glad you're here. I want to encourage you to join the email list if you haven't already, because it's the place where I share things that I don't share on the podcast, things that I'm learning about, places that I'm going to be speaking, classes and workshops that I'm

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doing, and a lot of other things. So, I encourage you to go to habitsonpurpose.com and just find the join the newsletter and just enter that.

Now, in general, there are a few things I really want you to always know and take with you from listening to this podcast. The first one is, you are not alone, even if you feel like no one else struggles how you do. And you're not uniquely defective because of the struggles you have.

Secondly, the secret to making any intentional change is to understand the root causes for why you think, feel, and act as you do. Forcing positive thinking, telling yourself some cheerful reframe that doesn't really feel authentic, using willpower, none of these things will create lasting change because they overlook these root causes. They don't address the relationship you have with yourself.

And in a related way, when you have incredible ideas and amazing concepts that you intellectually understand, but you don't bridge the gap between your intellectual understanding and applying them in the wild, in your everyday life, that's also a recipe for zero change.

So, my approach here on the podcast and in my coaching is always to offer approaches that not only bring you closer to a deeper understanding of yourself, but blend these approaches with practical ways that you can apply things in your everyday life. And that's how you can ditch habits that take more than they give and come home to yourself.

So, today's episode is all about urges. These are the inconvenient, uncomfortable impulses that drive so many of our behaviors. If you've ever asked yourself, "Why do I always reach for food when I'm stressed?" "Why can't I stop doom scrolling at night, even though I'm exhausted?" "Why do I keep volunteering for things I don't want to do?" Then today's episode is made for you.

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So, let's start off with defining what I mean by an urge. What is an urge? An urge is an intense desire or impulse to do something. It's a bodily sensation, and it's usually accompanied by a mental narrative. It feels urgent, often times feels very compelling. And the intensity can be either mild, medium, or like a tidal wave. You can have an urge to press snooze, an urge to walk by the break room to look to see if that cake somebody brought in from yesterday is still there, an urge to raid the hotel mini fridge, an urge to pretend like you're on your phone so somebody doesn't think that you saw them, an urge to be invisible after you make a mistake, an urge for another glass of wine, an urge to yell, an urge to check your phone, an urge to refresh your inbox.

You can also have urges or desires to do things that you really enjoy. An urge to exercise, an urge to call up your friend, an urge to cuddle, an urge to tidy up your space, a desire to turn off notifications and have 10 minutes to yourself. The urge to start a tedious project that you know that you're going to love having behind you.

So take a moment and just answer, what do you have urges for? Now, for many of us, our urges are accompanied by a bit of a morality statement. Urges for quote "negative things" are sometimes seen as a weakness, as proof that we're undisciplined, as something that we really need to battle or avoid or hide or conceal. But urges are not actually evidence of a character flaw. They are not moral failings. Urges are human. Urges are likely things that many organisms have. And rather than moral failings, urges are just data.

In the language of Internal Family Systems, urges come from parts of us that are trying to protect us or possibly help us cope. So if you've ever been in a loop of trying to fix your urges or make them go away, I want to offer you a new lens. Urges are simply communication. Urges are attempts to create safety, attempts to soothe, or attempts to bring you relief.

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So let's say you've had a long day. You are totally depleted. You've been running on fumes all week. You're basically completely run out. And when you come home, you make a beeline to the pantry and you open it, and you feel this overwhelming urge to eat something sweet. In that moment, you might notice an inner critic that says, "Really? Again? You were doing so well, and now you're standing in front of the pantry and you're about to go raid those cookies?" Or you might have an internal fixer that shows up and says, "Nope, nope, nope, nope, nope. We are going to wait this urge out. We are not caving. Let us go for a walk now. Walk away from the pantry."

But what if the urge wasn't a problem to fix? What if the urge was just a signal from a part of you that's trying to take care of the depletion, the stress, the emptiness from your day? When you listen to urges with curiosity instead of judgment, you can decode what they're pointing to. When you know what an urge is pointing toward, then you can have more information than just craving for a sweet treat. You can have perspective. And sometimes this can also open you up to feeling calmer and less taken over by this blind urge to eat all the Thin Mints.

Sometimes you can get curious. Hmm. You know, what I really need is to address this feeling of stress, this depletion. Gosh, I wonder if there's anything else going on. And you might notice another feeling. You might notice that underneath the depletion, maybe is a sadness or a loneliness or a disappointment. And if you're curious, you might ask, what might help this besides something sweet? Or you might tap into compassion and go, "Oh, wow. It is hard to have a day like I had. It's hard to feel wrung out. Of course, I want relief. But maybe I can find it somewhere besides the pantry."

So, let's take this a little bit further and I want to use the metaphor of a rowboat. So this metaphor can help you understand urges. Just picture you've got a rowboat, or whatever boat, and you're on some choppy water. And imagine that you are rowing really hard, you're staying on course, when all of a sudden there's a wave and a strong current that hits you and

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you are knocked off track. That wave and that current, that represents the urge. It pulls your attention, it changes what you feel drawn towards, it disrupts the direction you are headed. So what do you do?

You could beat yourself up for getting off course. "Oh my gosh, my boat just went the wrong direction." That would be like standing at the pantry door, berating yourself for wanting something sweet. You could paddle harder and try to overpower the current. That would be deploying willpower and pushing through with force and white-knuckling to try to make the urge go away. You could give up control and just do nothing, throw up your hands, and just let the current carry you wherever. And that would be like giving into the urge, just eating the cookies or whatever the thing is, and just surrendering without really choosing to.

But there's another option here. You could pause. In the boat, you could look around. What's behind you? What's ahead of you? What changed in that river that brought the wave in the first place? Maybe the river narrowed, maybe you drifted near some rocks, maybe the wind picked up, and you didn't notice it. That pause opens the door for awareness, which gives you the chance to choose your next move wisely.

In the same way, when an urge hits, you can pause, notice, take stock of your surroundings, and ask, what was going on right before this? What led me to this moment here? What just happened? What's this urge trying to help me with? What's underneath it? What am I worried is going to happen later on? And maybe you find out that you're lonely. Maybe you're afraid you're failing as a parent. Maybe your day felt empty and you just want something that feels good.

Urges are never about the object. It's never about the food, the screen, the alcohol, the purchase, the distraction. They're coping strategies trying to soothe or solve something deeper. A need, a fear, an uncomfortable emotion, a longing for help or relief. And just like in the boat, you don't need

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to thrash or surrender or overcorrect, but you can pause, reorient, and then make a choice.

So, why do we struggle with urges? Well, here's the kicker. Most of us were just never taught how to relate to our urges. We were taught to override them or judge them, especially if we're high-achieving, very self-controlled, disciplined types. So, it makes so much sense if to you, urges feel like a failure, especially if you're struggling to be deliberate when they show up for you. It makes sense if you've tried white-knuckling them, if you've tried suppressing them. And it makes sense if you're exhausted when these techniques don't work. Because what you've likely needed all along wasn't a stricter plan, it wasn't more discipline, it wasn't more motivation. What you've needed was a way to understand what the urge was really about.

So I've got three prompts for you that can help you decode an urge. These are three prompts that you can use the next time you notice an urge coming up. Number one: How am I experiencing this urge? What thoughts are here? What am I telling myself? What emotion am I feeling? Where am I noticing this in my body? Is it a tightness in my chest, a restlessness in my legs, a buzzing in my head? When you bring awareness to the words, to the thoughts, the emotions, and the sensations, before this full story about them comes in, that's when you can start to understand it better.

Number two: When you feel the urge, ask yourself, what might this urge be trying to help me with? Is it trying to soothe loneliness, distract from a hard feeling, give me a break from constant responsibility? What's the concern? What would I have to feel if I didn't act on this urge?

And number three: What would it be like to pause and sit with this feeling without acting right away? With no shaming, no immediate action, just noticing it with curiosity.

So let me give you those three prompts again, and these are the three prompts to decode any urge. How am I experiencing this urge? And you're looking at thoughts, emotions, or your somatic experience in your body.

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Number two, what might this urge be trying to help me with? What would be here for me to feel if I didn't act on it? And number three, what would it be like to pause and sit with it without acting right away?

Now, let's bring this together with a very common scenario. This is the urge to open your phone when you're bored or tired or anxious. Possibly the urge to overscroll. So let's say you find yourself reaching for your phone. You're in the line at the grocery store. It's the 10th time at night when you were going to go to bed, or it's at the dinner table, or at a stoplight. Instead of judging the urge, you pause and ask, what am I feeling right now? How am I experiencing this desire? Where is it? Oh, you know what? There's just like a longing and a pulling. What might this sensation be here to help me with? Oh my goodness, you know what? I feel lonely. I'm insecure. I'm noticing there's a craving for connection. I'm avoiding the quiet because in the quiet, I feel inadequate.

Right in this moment, now you have information. And now, you have access to choice. You can text a friend, put on music that soothes you, let yourself cry, journal, or scroll. Pull up your phone and open it, but do it consciously, not on autopilot. And this is the difference between reacting to an urge and responding with awareness and clarity, and kindness.

So why does this matter? Well, this matters because urges run so many of our habits. And when we ignore them or shame ourselves for having them, we miss the chance to know ourselves better. And when we try to bottle up our urges before we understand them, we basically perpetuate this tug of war.

And it's for these reasons that in the Habits on Purpose for Physicians small group coaching program, that this is a large part of the work we do. We work together to unpack what's driving habits. We learn how to respond, not just how to react. And we hone a skill set that allows you to learn the backstory of a pattern. So the protection that's baked into a pattern becomes explicit instead of remaining hidden. And all of this

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cultivates self-trust and an openness to being with your feelings instead of having to fix them or escape them.

So as this pertains to urges, we never need to suppress urges or get rid of them. Rather, the goal is to transform how you relate to them so that you can move from feeling stuck into a place where you just have self-trust. And a really beautiful part of doing the work with urges is that the same process of slowing down, being with the experience of the urge, and then investigating what's underneath it, is the same thing you can do with any uncomfortable feeling.

So to recap, urges are not problems to fix. They're simply data and communication. They point towards something really interesting to learn. And you can build the capacity to pause, listen, and choose what to do when you have an urge. And this will help you tap into feeling interested and warm instead of judgmental and resistant.

So if you notice that you are ready to go deeper into this type of work, if you're a woman physician, there are a few ways that we can work together. The first main way is HOPP small group coaching, and the next round starts in June of 2025, and enrollment is currently open right now. You can learn more when you go to habitsonpurpose.com/hopp, that's HOPP. There's also going to be an option to preview the group coaching experience. And you can get more information about our preview week when you go to habitsonpurpose.com/hopp or habitsonpurpose.com/preview.

Now, the next way that we can connect and do this work, where you don't need to be a woman physician, is the upcoming Befriending Anger course. This course is a practical and compassionate introduction to relating differently to this tricky emotion. And it's a perfect companion to the work we do in HOPP. So if you're interested in both, you are welcome to take advantage of both. The course runs the last two weeks in May and leads

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right into the start of HOPP small group coaching. You can get more information at habitsonpurpose.com/anger.

And if you just want a consolidated way to get access to all this information, just join the email list and you will get that straight to your inbox. Thanks so much for listening, and I'll see you next time.

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.