

Ep #173: From Self-Judgement to Self-Compassion - One Story at a Time



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Kristi Angevine

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Welcome to Habits on Purpose Episode #173. This is your host, Kristi Angevine. And today I'm going to teach you exactly how to do a powerful narrative technique. And it's a technique that will help you get an alternate perspective on yourself or a situation that you've gone through. This technique is so powerful because it helps you cultivate clarity and self-compassion.

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 am so happy to be here with you for this episode. As I'm recording this episode, it is really early in the morning. My house is very, very quiet because everyone else is asleep. It's one of my favorite times of the morning. And also, we have new kittens in our house. So it is possible that as I'm recording this, faintly in the background, I may also be listening to tiny kitties trying to let me know that they are not asleep and that they would love some attention and cuddling and playing.

And my guess is you won't hear that because I have an amazing podcast editing team that makes the sound quality really great and will probably remove any little kitten noises. But as I'm recording this, I will be hearing them. And so every so often, you might hear that there's a smile on my face. And you might hear that in my voice because I'm listening to these sweet, adorable little kittens.

Now, whether or not you have ever had a pet or small little tiny animals in your house, you can probably imagine that with all the delight and the cuteness and cuddles also comes a lot of work. And with this new extra work, my family and I are learning how to integrate these two little kittens into our life. And 100%, I can tell you that in response to bringing them into our life, we have had stressful moments. It has been ripe with opportunities

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for recognizing our stressful responses, for getting snippy, for feeling irritated, for getting frustrated, for feeling overwhelmed, for having extra things to do when we were already running late. And it's been really fascinating to watch how all of us respond to this new set of stressors.

For me, whenever I encounter some sort of situation where there's tension or friction or new learning, it is like somebody hands me a flashlight or a mirror and directs it right back at me so I can see all of my default responses really loud and clear.

So, with that in mind, what I'm going to share with you today is a technique that I have noticed that I have gone to for myself over the course of the last little bit that we've had these new kittens in our life. And it is a technique that I call the Once-Upon-a-Time Anthropologist Technique. Now that's a mouthful, so you can just shorten it to the Once-Upon-a-Time Technique.

And I'm sure this approach has some very technical name that hails from narrative psychology and narrative coaching, but it is not something that I learned from either of those fields. And so I just made up a name that works really well for me and for my clients, and for how we use this technique together. And I just call it the Once-Upon-a-Time Technique.

So the Once-Upon-a-Time Technique has two parts, and it's intended to be done over two settings with space in between. And what I'm going to do today is: this podcast is specifically oriented to walk you through how to do this technique. So if you're looking for something that is really tangible and really easy to schedule into your week as an action you can take to get some insight, get some perspective, and help you reflect on something that's going on for you, this is the episode for you.

So, as you listen, I want you to bring to mind a recent experience that really sticks out for you. Or bring to mind maybe a particularly salient experience that you've had in your life that you really associate as shaping your perspective or shaping your identity. And when you're done listening to this, or if you've got the opportunity right now to just get out your computer or

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your phone or a pen and paper, whatever you like to document notes on, you can actually do this exercise right now on paper or on your computer as we go through the podcast.

If you're not in a position to do that, just listen to all the steps and you will be really well prepared for doing it later. And then when you go do it later, just bring up the podcast and you can put me on 2x so it goes quickly, and you can go through each of the steps and just do it then.

So bring to mind this recent experience or a really remarkable experience that you see as just a part of who you are or something that's had a great impact on you. With that experience in mind, what you're going to do is you are going to set a timer. And then you are going to write about that experience for 10 or 15 minutes.

Now, the timer is important because the timer keeps you constrained so that you don't sit there staring at the page for 10 or 15 minutes wondering what to write, thinking about the perfect sentence, stressing out over how you phrase things, and then ultimately not writing anything because you run out of time. It gives you discrete focus so that you can be really efficient with this experience. And you can write for less. So if you feel like you can write in 5 minutes or 7 minutes, all that you need, beautiful. The timer is to keep you focused and make sure that you don't spend too much time on this or overthink this.

So set your timer and start writing. And what you're going to do is you're going to write about your experience in as much subjective detail as possible. Write about what happened. Write about how you felt about what happened. Write about what was going on for you in your mind, what you were thinking about, what you were stressed about, what you were happy about, what your interpretation of the entire experience was. Just get everything that's in your mind about that experience out onto paper.

Now, if as you do this, you find yourself staring at the page, just thinking, I have no idea what to write. Just start writing, even if that means you start

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writing, I have no idea what to write. I'm trying to write about bla bla bla experience, but I don't know where to start. Just start there.

Then, once your timer goes off, just stop. If you want to finish a sentence, totally fine, but stop what you wrote wherever you are.

Then you're going to go back and set another timer. And this timer also I recommend for 10 to 15 minutes. And you are going to rewrite what you just wrote, but you're going to start this with "Once upon a time..." And then you're going to go on to describe yourself and the situation in third person.

And as you do, my challenge to you is to channel an energy of curiosity. I want you to step into the role of an anthropologist researcher or a documentary filmmaker that's peering in on another individual, maybe somebody from a culture that they just don't know well, and they are observing what that person thinks, feels, and does. And I want you to keep your tone kind of middle of the road. We're not going for describing a hero's journey. We're just going for neutral, factual narrator.

So, I'm going to give you an example of both of these so that you can get a sense of what this might look like. So here's an example of a hypothetical draft one and draft two for a recent event. And this is a hypothetical example that was inspired by some of the things that I hear from some of my clients, as well as things that I've personally experienced.

So, the other day, I'd finished packing, gone on a run, showered, and I was getting ready to do some last-minute errands and I realized I forgot to send the email for my speaking engagement proposal. And the deadline was this morning at 10 AM. I freaked out. Sadly, missing a deadline like this is so like me. I pretend to have my shit together, but in reality, it's one big disorganized mess. If people saw the to-do list that follows me everywhere, I would die. I never make any meaningful progress. I feel so deflated.

I quickly threw together an apology note and asked if there was still time to submit my proposal. The rest of the day, I was totally preoccupied and

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worrying that the main coordinator and her administrative staff must be thinking all these terrible things about me, and thinking how disorganized I am. And frankly, it was just exhausting. By the time it was dinnertime, I was frazzled, and I found myself being snappy with my spouse. Now my spouse is withdrawn, and I don't know what to say to fix it. I hate how one small problem haunts me and affects every facet of my life. How pathetic. I feel so stuck.

Okay, so that's an example of draft one, just writing about an experience.

Now here's an example of draft two.

Once upon a time, a woman named Beatrice went for a run, showered, and proceeded to finish packing her bags. Right as she was getting ready to do some last errands, she realized she forgot to send an email. The deadline for the email was three hours prior. Beatrice freaked out and was sad about missing the deadline, but wrote an apology email and inquired if there was still time for her speaking proposal. She told herself, "This is so like me. I pretend to have my shit together, but in reality, I'm one big disorganized mess. If people saw the to-do list that follows me everywhere, I would die." She also told herself that she never makes any meaningful progress, and she felt really deflated.

Beatrice noticed that she was preoccupied with worry. She imagined what the administrative staff and the main event coordinator might think of her and that they might think she's too disorganized to include her in the conference. By evening, Beatrice was completely frazzled and really snippy with her spouse. When her spouse was quiet, Beatrice didn't know what to say about the situation to make it better. Beatrice hates how one small problem haunts her in every facet of her life. She tells herself, "How pathetic," and she feels so stuck.

Okay, so now that you have two examples of draft one and draft two, a few very specific points need to be mentioned. If in your original draft you said something like, "I can't believe what an idiot I was." In your

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once-upon-a-time draft, don't say, "Once upon a time, there was a person who was a total idiot." Instead, phrase it like this. "Once upon a time, there was a person who had XYZ experience, and afterwards, she would say to herself, I can't believe what an idiot I was." This is how you remove yourself from being inside the experience to documenting what you're seeing from the outside, third-person anthropologist documentary filmmaker view.

Now, the next point. As you write, do your best to hold off on editorializing or diagnosing, or analyzing the character that you're writing about. For example, if in your first draft you wrote about wanting friends but feeling insecure and feeling like the odd man out when it came to making friends as a kid, and also having that same experience as an adult, your once-upon-a-time draft might sound like, "He really wanted to have friends and to belong like he saw the others doing, and he wanted it to be easy." When he was older, he had the same feeling of being the odd man out.

Refrain from saying, "And this was because he was so socially awkward and other people didn't want to be around him." Refrain from saying, "He wouldn't have been so insecure if he would have been smarter or more socially savvy like his sister." Just keep it to the facts that were in draft one. Don't analyze, don't hypothesize, don't try to diagnose the character.

Now, it's often a challenge to write with the objectivity of a neutral third party, but trust me, the payoff is really worth it.

All right, now here comes the easy part. When you are done with your second draft, I want you to take both drafts and set them aside for 1 to 2 days. Just set them aside. Don't do anything else with them.

Now, after a couple days have gone by, and I wouldn't go more than 3 or 4 days on this, you know, if it goes up to a week, it's totally fine, but it'll be a little bit distant in your mind. But try to do something between about 2 to 4 days, 1 to 4 days. And then this is where you pick up.

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Step number one, read that second draft. And notice any subjectivity that may have made its way into your writing. So you're basically noticing, did you show up as a little bit more the anthropologist with an opinion? And if you did, that's totally fine. Just notice if it's there or not. Notice if there's any opinions, any bias, any ideas, any analysis that came up in your anthropologist once-upon-a-time version.

Then, as you're reading it, I want you to notice. Do you read it and think, "What a loser, I would never trust this person?" Do you read it and think, "Wow, that sounds really hard for this person?" Do you feel judgment? Do you feel warmth? Do you feel embarrassment, anger, understanding, or irritation?

Write down what you feel in response to reading about this character. What you feel now is really revealing in that it's a peek into your thoughts about yourself. These thoughts about yourself are usually running in the background. They are implicit, they are subconscious, they are things that we typically don't notice very well because the volume is turned down so low that we don't detect them.

Now, step two. Once you have done that, I want you to deliberately tap into curiosity and compassion. And it may take a little work to feel curiosity and compassion, but I'll give you some prompts for how you can do it. But once you're there, then you are going to set another timer for about 10 or 15 minutes, and you are going to write about your reflections, your emotions, and your ideas in relation to that person that you read about in draft two.

So, here are some prompts that can help you tap into curiosity and compassion and do this part of the exercise. You can finish the following prompts:

I wonder what was going on that made this person have this experience.

How come this situation unfolded as it did?

Why might this person have felt this way?

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It must have been a challenge to go through that, and...

It's totally understandable this person felt this way.

Now, if none of those prompts land, particularly the last one of "It's totally understandable this person felt this way," just remind yourself that even if things don't always easily make sense on the surface, there's always an internal logic to what we do. We may not understand why a feeling or a reaction happens in a certain set of circumstances, but there's always a good reason behind it, even if we don't quite see what the rationale is.

Now, another effective way to find compassion for this part of the exercise is to imagine the person that you wrote about in draft two, imagine they are a child, or they are a friend that you dearly care about. And you can even substitute in your friend's name or change the phrasing to make the story appropriate for a younger character.

So, for example, instead of Beatrice and her speaking proposal email, you could say, "Once upon a time, there was this 12-year-old girl who went by the name of Rosie. Rosie forgot to get the permission slip filled out for the school trip," and so on and so forth.

When you do this, this might make it easier for you to feel curious and compassionate and be able to write about what you think about that person who went through that experience. And from curiosity and compassion, it's so much easier to refrain from a scathing self-rebuke in your reflection.

So, here's an example for that step two with our fictional character Beatrice.

My goodness, Beatrice is working so hard. She has a lot of things on her plate, and she's really hard on herself. It seemed like she feels overextended, and makes that mean that she's disorganized through and through. When the truth is, she seems very organized. How interesting. And that's a little bit sad too. It must be really painful to think that with one omission, it's a reason to beat herself up. I wonder where this tendency originated. Seems to me like she needs to know that it's normal to forget

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things from time to time. It might simply be a signal that she's mentally spread too thin in too many directions at once. But it doesn't mean she's pathetic. It doesn't mean she's a disorganized mess. She's actually tremendously persistent and kind, and resourceful.

So, step two of this exercise gives you a gold mine of useful information. First of all, you get access to the tone of your inner self-assessment. And secondly, you get to see what comes up for you when you deliberately channel curiosity and compassion towards the third-person representation of yourself.

Now, once you've done this exercise on paper, there's a modification that I like to assign. That modification is to do a quick once-upon-a-time recap of one thing per day, during your day. So this is a way to actually integrate this practice into your lived experience on the fly.

So, say you get behind at work and you have a pile of delinquent discharge summaries or a bunch of phone calls that you need to make that you weren't expecting that you would have to do at the end of the day. In the moment, you think to yourself, "Once upon a time, a woman named Christy got behind at work and looked up to find she had more charting to take care of than she realized." And after you do that, your job is to notice your thoughts and feelings about this scenario and see if you can get any of the negative, annoyed, judgmental thoughts and feelings to pull back for a moment so you can tap into that curious, compassionate perspective and look at the woman who's behind from a place of curious compassion. And then you just see what happens from there.

Now, you may think, "If I'm curious and compassionate, won't I just be soft and lax? Won't my standards plummet? And won't I just become this lazy, mediocre mess?" Actually, quite the opposite happens. Kristin Neff has studied self-compassion for many, many years, and she so nicely puts it this way: Tender self-compassion allows us to comfort and reassure

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ourselves when we don't succeed, and fierce self-compassion inspires us to try again.

So when we can find warmth and curiosity and channel these emotions toward ourselves on purpose, we can more easily feel validated, feel seen, and feel understood. And when anyone feels seen, heard, and understood, and feels like their experience is a valid one, there is so much less discouragement, anxiety, insecurity, criticism, or worthlessness to overcome. So it becomes easier to do hard work, to keep high standards. It's easier to focus, it's easier to be efficient, and it's easier to fail and dust ourselves off and try again.

So, that's what I have for you today. And I encourage you, if you listened and you find yourself intrigued, go calendar time in your schedule to do this exercise and then see what comes up for you as you do.

So thank you so much for listening, and I will see you next time.

If you're a woman physician and you want to go deeper with this kind of work and create changes in your everyday life, come join us in the next round of Habits on Purpose for Physicians small group coaching.

Enrollment is open now and spots are limited. Learn more at habitsonpurpose.com/hopp. And if you're listening to this in live time and you want to start this kind of work even sooner than our program starts, there are two options.

The Befriending Anger course starts soon, and you can still join us. It's a two-week course designed to help you understand this complex and very often misunderstood emotion. And the Habits on Purpose for Physicians preview week is a free week that gives you a sense of what being in HOPP small group coaching is like. Check them both out in the show notes, or you can go to habitsonpurpose.com/anger for the anger course or /preview for the preview. I hope you have a really good week, and I'm so grateful you tuned in.

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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.