

Ep #176: How to Handle Overwhelm When Things Take Longer Than Expected



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With Your Host

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Have you ever started your day with a really clear plan, some non-negotiables, a few additional things that might be nice to get done, some things that seem reasonable to accomplish, and then everything just takes longer than you expect?

Suddenly, you're really behind, super stressed. You're tempted to either power through or throw your hands up, or maybe just beat yourself up for doing it wrong. If you've ever spun out in that all too familiar cycle of overwhelm, self-blame, getting irritable with other people, and feeling profound urgency, this episode is for you. Let's talk about what to actually do when things take longer than expected and how to move forward without stretching yourself thin or making yourself wrong.

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. I am so glad to be here with you today. I have been thinking a lot about what to do when things take longer than you expect, when the best laid plans go sideways because something unexpected comes up and expands the amount of work that needs to be done, or something that ordinarily would take a certain amount of time takes longer than you'd expect, or something kind of throws a wrench in the best laid plans. And even the most realistic anticipated expectations for how long things would take, they're just not accurate.

And the reason this is on my mind is because I've butted up against trying to have sort of a lot of moving parts fit together in a way that kind of doesn't make me feel like a crazy lady running around trying to make sure things happen. And the reason that this is on my mind is I'm finding that for myself and for my clients, one of the most difficult things about things taking longer than expected or longer than planned isn't the actual experience of things taking longer, or the surprise that something took longer than you thought it would. The most difficult part is what we make it mean and how we talk to ourselves during and after we realize that something took longer than we expected.

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So let me explain what I'm talking about. And while I'm doing this, I want you to think about if there are times in your life, times in your day, times today, that you've already had an experience where something took longer than planned, and in the aftermath of that, things were really difficult. Not because you're trying to play catch up, but more specifically, because of how you're feeling and how you're talking to yourself as you are trying to play catch up.

So, in a situation where something takes longer than you expect, there are some very common reactions that I notice. People get discouraged, they feel overwhelmed, they check out, want to throw their hands up. Many times people beat themselves up and conclude that they've shot their whole day. Or they push themselves really hard, maybe they stay up really late and they overextend to make up for the longer than expected task.

Now, if you've had this, you may have read some of the conventional advice for scheduling your time. And if you have, you might say to yourself, when something like this happens, something to the tune of, you know, I just didn't manage my time well. I should have given myself 30 minutes to do the task, and then after that 30 minutes, made sure it was done and moved on no matter what. Because you know, that's how you hold yourself accountable. You decide in advance how long you're going to give a task, and you do it in that time.

But notice how this narrative has a bit of judgment to it. It's making you wrong for mismanaging your time. And instead of giving a solution for the present moment, it's flogging you now by comparing you to what you should have done in a very unfavorable way, and it doesn't really offer inspiration for a future solution, but a criticism for not doing the better solution already.

So, what's the matter of these responses to something taking longer than expected? Well, essentially, all these responses are different forms of making yourself wrong. And when you make yourself wrong, it blocks any

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productive action. It blocks learning, and it risks you stretching yourself too thin in the aftermath of something not going as you planned.

Now, how do I know this? Well, this is an area of personal expertise. I have talked about the phenomenon of shoehorning in the past and we'll link that episode for you in the show notes. But shoehorning is where you try to squish too many things into too little time. And this today is a related issue that comes from my direct firsthand experience.

So, here's what this situation looks like for me. Say I'm making travel arrangements. I need to make a couple flight reservations and a hotel. And I estimate that it's going to take a certain amount of time and then I add maybe an extra 30 minutes to that estimation. And then when I'm going through scheduling my day, I plug in that amount of time and then I build everything else around that.

Well, when it comes to making those reservations, a website crashes right when I'm about to pay. And then, after the purchase is ultimately complete, I get a notice that a companion fare is available. And that companion fare is expiring in about three weeks, and I know I'm never going to use it in time. So, I go back and cancel the original flight. I make a new one. And then I discover that there's a credit that maybe would save five hundred dollars. And you know what? Maybe I should send that credit to a relative of mine, or maybe I should use it for this flight.

And then in the midst of this, I have somebody who's in my travel group who reaches out and says that meeting on a different day actually is going to save them like five or six hours of driving. So the original flight and rental car, and hotel need to be adjusted. And then on top of that, I also have in the back of my mind that, you know, sometimes if you wait a few hours, sometimes a flight disappears or a hotel sells out or the Airbnb that I had my eye on is now booked. So, what originally seemed like it would take maybe an hour or two, actually ends up taking four hours.

Or another classic situation for me is if I'm driving somewhere and I run into traffic. And there's, perhaps, like an automobile accident that's nothing I can

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control. Even if I'd left an hour earlier from my house, I happened to run into traffic, it just takes longer than expected. Or another theme for things taking longer than expected are things with my kids. There's a play date that's going so well that we decide to just extend it.

However, then we leave the play date, and then we run into the aforementioned traffic. And because of that traffic, the other parent ends up getting called to go pick up the dog from doggy daycare, which delays them making dinner. And even with using all the easy options, everything gets behind. And then a kid gets sick and maybe needs to go to the doctor, or a colleague of mine gets sick, and helping them out feels like the right thing to do, which just adds to things that get in the way of doing the original plan.

And these things in and of themselves are intrinsically neutral. But when these things happen, my old go-to was to completely spin out and overwhelm and kind of freak out. And inside my head, if you could look inside, you would probably hear, "Shit, shit, shit. How am I ever going to get things done? It's too late. I can't pivot. I don't even know how to adjust without major consequences. Something's going to have to be dropped from my list. Either I'm not going to be able to exercise, or I'm going to skimp on sleep, or maybe a previous commitment, or time I was originally planning to spend with friends or family." Something small or large. And I would get frantic, and I would scurry to squish things in, or I would catastrophize about the negative impacts of not getting things done. Or I would hear myself being snippy with my family and see the looks on their faces that told me I was being a little bit over the top or irritable, and wonder, what is wrong with my people? Why are they looking at me?

And then later on realize, oh, they're looking at me like I'm being harsh because I am being harsh. And I'm being harsh and a little bit prickly because I'm stressed. And I'm stressed because I'm behind and telling myself things about being behind that really just ramp up the intensity level in ways that aren't fun to be around.

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And when I'm doing this, I get very short-sighted and I will be thinking things like, "Gosh, why didn't I think about this in the first place? Like, how come I didn't get caught up a long time ago, so that things weren't so tight today? Somebody else wouldn't have let this get so out of hand. What the heck?"

And in this state, everything feels really tight and pressurized. And all I see is there's too much to do, there's too little time. And I just see all the ways I am just not measuring up. I see my ineptitude. I see that I'm not being kind to the people around me. Or I see all the reasons why other people should have done better so that they didn't put me in this position. And all this time spent in self-flagellation or blaming other people is really unproductive. I'm not actually using the time that I do have left to make headway on something. And even if I'm not doing anything specific, I'm also not taking a breather, catching my own breath.

So I end up being in this funky space of stuck, feeling inadequate, maybe feeling embarrassed and overwhelmed, maybe feeling angry. And all I want to do is just exit, escape, and get some relief. And overall, I am just irritable, impatient, and my perspective is really narrowed. All because something took longer than expected, and then I made it mean all sorts of negative things. So maybe you do this type of thing too.

Now, if this very detailed scenario that I outlined, if this approach to handling things going off track, if it worked, that'd be no problem. But it exacerbates an already tricky challenge and just doesn't work. So let's talk about what we can do instead. So this is very simple. You catch it, you name the context, get creative, and get perspective on what actually matters most. So let me explain what I mean here.

So number one, you catch yourself in the act. As soon as you notice that something is taking longer than you expect, longer than you planned for, you pause and you mentally note, "You know what? This is one of those moments where things are taking longer than I expected."

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Number two, you name the context. Context is everything when it comes to meaning-making. So, after you've paused, you check in on the context around the task, and after you check the context, you get as scrappy and resourceful and creative as possible. So, how do you check the context? You ask yourself questions like, "Is there something I can do differently with this task now in order to complete it? Can this wait? Or is it so important to do now that adjusting the rest of the day is just what I need to do? How can I be resourceful and creative in this moment? How can I make this a little easier on myself? Who can help me with this task or with the other tasks? Can the other things I need to do wait? How could the other things on my list be distilled or adjusted in a way that helps me feel okay right now?"

By asking these questions, you're placing the task that took longer than expected in a larger context and thinking about it from a bunch of different angles that help you tap into some very matter of fact, rational, and creative thinking that help get you out of overwhelm.

Now, number three, give yourself perspective on purpose. So, how do you give yourself perspective on purpose? Well, number one, you need to do this because when we get overwhelmed and feel stuck and irritable, our perspective narrows. All we can see is whatever we have told ourselves. This is not going well. I don't have enough time. All I will see is all the ways things aren't going well and all the ways I don't have enough time. And we want to expand our perspective on purpose. And the way we do that is we can ask ourselves a simple question. At the end of the day, what really matters here? At the end of the week, what really matters? At the end of the year, what matters most?

Now, when it comes to what matters, this is where we're thinking about what are our values? What's really, really important? Is it connection? Is it joy? Is it freedom? What actually matters most to you? When you know what matters most, it can help you place your particular tasks and your particular to-do list, and your particular timeline that you're dealing with in the here and now in a larger context.

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And when you do all of this, it can help you adjust your plan and get done what you can get done while keeping the bigger picture in mind and staying aligned with what you really, truly value. And when you do these things, that's when you can go through the experience of something taking longer than you expected without it feeling like a pressure cooker.

And then later, retrospectively, you can learn from your experience with some non-shaming, really productive questions like, "What made me get off track? Was it preventable? What did I do really well with, even though it took longer than expected? What could I have done differently? Next time this happens, what will I plan to do?"

Notice how this kind of reflection is very matter-of-fact and compassionate, which is totally different from a meltdown like, "Gah, I hate everyone. What is my problem?"

So, just to recap, the way that you can have a different approach to what you make getting off track mean and how you navigate it in the moment and in the aftermath is first, you catch it and just name, "I'm having one of those times where something takes longer than I thought."

Then, you name the context and check for the context around what's going on, and see how you can get really resourceful and creative about looking at your situation in a way that's going to be really helpful. And then give yourself perspective on purpose by asking yourself, what matters most at the end of the day, the week, the year, what really matters most to me?

So I want to give you just an example of what this could look like. So, say you are two hours into a task that you thought would take 30 minutes. And you notice the time, and you have a mini internal combustion in your brain. "WTH, how is it noon? I have one hour until kiddo pickup." And then all of a sudden you realize this is a familiar feeling. Maybe it's tight or hot, or you feel like really weighty on your shoulders, you feel overwhelmed. And in that moment you just realize, "Oh, this is familiar." And you pause, maybe take a couple of breaths or stretch or stand up, move, and you just mentally

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note. I'm having one of those experiences where I'm off track. This is just taking me longer than expected. Okay, I caught it.

Let's check the context here. All right, is there anything I can change right now to help me get this complete? You know, I really don't think there is. This travel snafu, it needs to be tended to now, and if I pause and I move on to the next, I'm going to be dealing with a bigger problem later. So, how long can the other things on my list wait? Is there somebody who can help me right now? Is there a creative way to think about this that maybe I wasn't thinking about before? You know what? I could move this back a little bit and still be able to get this done. I wonder if that thing I was going to do later tonight, if I could delay it just a little or distill it.

And then after asking those types of questions, you follow this up with saying, "You know what? At the end of the day, let's just check in, what really matters?" You know, connection matters more than being on time. Connection matters more than checking off all those boxes. Okay. Or conversely, what might happen is, you know what matters? What matters is being able to make sure there are not profound consequences later. And this is going to haunt me all year long if I can't really get all this done. It's going to have long-lasting consequences. And right now, there's just not a way to stop and adjust. So for now, I'm just going to have to plow through.

And just notice though, by thinking that through, it sounds so different than, "Oh my gosh, this is terrible. What's my problem? Ah!" Right? When you ask yourself these types of questions, the answers you get will really not only guide you to know what you need to decide to do in the moment, but they will give you a different feeling and a different way of approaching things that's filled with more calm, more patience, and more clarity. So consider this your antidote to overwhelm and freezing and making yourself wrong and getting all frantic.

And then, later on, when you're it's the next day and the dust has settled, you can do a quick evaluation. What went well? What didn't go well? What can I do next time?

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So, the next time something takes longer than expected, instead of defaulting to judgment or hustle, see it as an invitation to pause, check the context, get creative, and realign yourself and reconnect with what matters most to you. You don't need to fix everything or squeeze more in. You just need to catch what's going on, name it, and see if you can pivot with a little more perspective.

So, thank you for listening to this episode. And if it resonated with you, I would love for you to leave me a review, shoot me an email, or share it with a friend. Until next time, be kind to yourself. You are doing better than you think.

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 habitsonpurpose.com/preview for the preview. I hope you have a really good week, and I'm so grateful you tuned in.

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.