

Ep #178 : Awareness Precedes Change: What I Wish I Knew



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With Your Host

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Have you ever found yourself thinking, "I know I shouldn't be doing this, but why am I still doing it anyways?" Or, "I've watched myself do this time and time again, and it is so frustrating, but I can't seem to change for more than a week or so before I'm right back in the same place." Or, "I'm super aware of my own patterns and tendencies. What is my problem that I can't actually change them?"

If any of this sounds familiar, you are not alone. Today, I want to revisit one of the most foundational ideas in behavior change and habit change and share why awareness is essential, but also, why awareness alone is not enough. Let's dive in.

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. If you are new here, welcome. I'm so glad you decided to tune in, and I hope you'll stick around for a few episodes. If you are one of the old-timers, thank you for sticking with me. It's so good to know there are people who are listening to the podcast week in and week out from the moment that it came out.

Now, today, we're revisiting one of the fundamental ideas from one of the earliest episodes. And that idea is, awareness precedes change. This was actually a topic of episode 2, I believe, and I went back and re-listened to that episode. And the core message still holds true, but as I listened to it, I realized how much my understanding has grown and shifted since then. So this episode is my way of giving that original idea a bit of a refresh and adding in some deeper layers that I think you're going to find really helpful.

So let's start with the heart of the original message. You cannot change what you're not aware of. When we are running on autopilot, repeating old patterns of thinking and repeating old feelings, stuck in loops of behavior that we don't fully understand, awareness is what turns on the light. It is like going into a dark room and you flip on the light switch, and awareness is what helps us see what specifically we're doing, what we're thinking, how

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we're feeling, the circumstances around what we're doing, what urges and impulses are driving us, etc.

Now that said, awareness sounds simple, but it's not always easy. It's shockingly common to spend years, if not decades, reenacting the same patterns of behavior, thinking, and feeling without even realizing it. All of us can live like we're walking on the same treadmill of habitual cycles: people-pleasing, perfectionistic thinking, procrastination, emotional numbing, all without self-awareness.

Now, I speak about this with an intimacy because this was me for so long, and some days this still is me. And even when we do know intellectually that awareness is important, actually being aware on purpose in real life, in real time, is a whole different story. Knowing that you should pause and notice is not the same thing as actually doing it in the moment when you're stressed or triggered or overwhelmed. Talking about awareness is different from practicing it. Just like watching reels about exercise isn't the same thing as working out.

So let's shift into expanding the definition of awareness beyond just thoughts. One thing that stood out to me when I listened to that old episode is that I framed awareness almost entirely through the lens of cognition. I talked a lot about noticing your thoughts, observing your feelings, watching your behaviors from the vantage point of a bit of an analytical researcher-student who loves to figure things out. And while all of that is still really valuable, there's a much bigger picture here.

Our awareness is not just cognitive. Our awareness is also somatic, emotional, and nervous system-based. It includes feeling sensations in our body, not just listing them, appreciating shifts in energy, not just labeling them, being aware of what it's like when mood states seem to come out of nowhere, and welcoming and being present with emotional waves that may not be linked to any specific thought at all. To be more fully aware, we have to notice what's happening not just in our minds, but in our bodies. And I'll

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be honest, this was something I really struggled with personally for a long time.

So, as a bit of a nerd, I love learning. If I could have built a full-time job as a student, I would have totally taken it. So when I first learned cognitive behavioral therapy-based tools and coaching that was cognitive-based, it felt like a revelation. I love thinking about thinking. I loved analyzing how to bridge my way from an unintentional thought to an intentional thought. And for years, I was passionate about cognitive tools and ideas, and unbeknownst to myself, I over-relied on them.

When I felt off, my default was to scour my brain for the thought error that I assumed was the primary root cause creating my discomfort. I would white-knuckle my way through tough moments, convinced that if I could just think the right thought, I would feel better. But in some situations, no amount of reframing helped. Because what was happening was more emotional and somatic, not just cognitive. And I was trying to think my way out of feelings that needed to be felt or sensations that needed to be noticed and simply allowed.

So, another huge shift for me since that early episode is understanding that the human mind is not just this single entity filled with all sorts of contradictions. But our mind is better understood as a multifaceted ecosystem or maybe as a team. So, in this way of thinking, we have a bunch of different personas or a bunch of different inner parts or sides to our personality that show up in different moments.

Now, those of you who are familiar with Internal Family Systems, or IFS for short, you've heard me talk about this topic before. But if you're new to the idea, here's a super simple way to think about it. IFS, Internal Family Systems, is a model in psychotherapy that teaches that our inner life is made up of different parts or sides or personas that make us who we are. You might think of them as a collective of different inner voices, different sides of your personality, or an inner team of all the different personas that make up who you are in your life.

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You might have a perfectionistic side, a rebellious side, an inner critic, your work persona that's different than your parent persona, an inner cheerleader, a people-pleaser part, and you might have a voice that nags at you to stop saying yes when deep down you really want to say no. These different parts or sides of us develop as we have life experience that call on us to adapt and protect ourselves in different ways.

So when I talk about awareness now, what I also mean is awareness of what part of you or what persona is showing up in any given moment. And if parts language doesn't quite resonate for you, you can think about this as noticing what voice of my system is the loudest right now? What urge or emotion, or impulse is the most dominant? What is the tone of my inner dialogue?

And here's the key. Noticing your inner world from the perspective of these different parts will actually enrich your awareness. This is because the different parts of us aren't just one-dimensional. You might have an inner perfectionist that's predominantly harsh and crabby and critical, but also brings a sense of fun to being really detail-oriented. The parts of us are complex, just like people are. And this kind of appreciation helps us prevent from falling for pop psychology advice that sounds like, "Silence your inner critic," or "Banish those negative thoughts."

So while this might sound logical, the actual effect of trying to eradicate a part of your psyche often backfires because the harshness and perfectionism of a part is almost always wired right next to something positive. So you might have a tendency to be perfectionistic that's wired right next to a strength for noticing subtle details or a deep desire to protect you and other people from harm. So this particular lens informed by Internal Family Systems has radically changed how I understand and practice my awareness.

Now, the next thing I want to talk about is the trap of over-awareness or intellectualized awareness. Now, this is something I am an expert on. And this is where awareness becomes just another way to beat yourself up, or a

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way to analyze yourself without any compassion. So this is what this looks like. Maybe you've caught yourself thinking things like, "I know why I'm doing this, and I still can't stop. I should know better. If I could just think a better thought. What's wrong with me that I'm still stuck? I should be further along than I am."

So, sometimes we use our awareness as another form of self-judgment or as a way to stay stuck in thinking mode instead of feeling mode. And if that sounds familiar, please know, even just noticing that you're caught in that particular loop still counts as awareness, and that is progress.

And this leads me to something that was really missing from my original episode and my original way of thinking about things. Awareness without compassion, curiosity, and care is not enough. It's kind of like getting into a car that is fully packed and ready to go, but you just don't have the keys.

So awareness filtered through, say, a perfectionistic or a critical lens, will just keep you stuck in the same old patterns. So if your tone with your awareness sounds like, "Ugh, here I go again. Look at me thinking those thoughts. I'm just so bad at this. What is wrong with me doing thought work? I am a coach, and I should have this figured out by now."

That is simply awareness hijacked by self-criticism. So the kind of awareness that actually creates real change is awareness that's paired with curiosity and sounds like, "Huh, I notice I'm thinking X, Y, Z. I wonder what's going on here." Or compassion. "Of course, this is how I'm reacting. You know, it makes a lot of sense." Or care. "How can I support myself in this really hard moment?"

Often, what we're noticing inside ourselves are parts or strategies or patterns that have gone neglected, invalidated, maybe even ignored or dismissed, possibly treated like problems to fix. But these things, these reactions, patterns, they're not problems per se. They're simply signs of something that needs some tending to. Perhaps a part of you that will benefit from being seen, heard, understood, or simply given some company with a patient sense of presence.

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As Carl Jung said, quote, "Until you make the unconscious conscious, it will direct your life, and you will call it fate." So, I want to keep this really practical. Here is a super simple awareness practice that you can try anytime that will really enhance your awareness if you're used to more of a cognitive approach.

First, pause. Take a breath and ask yourself, "What am I noticing right now in my thoughts, in my emotions, in my body? What mood, energy, or part or persona feels most present? Am I noticing phrases, images, urges, needs, yearnings, memories, emotions? Am I noticing colors or even multiple conflicting things at once?" Just pause and notice what you notice.

And then, after that, notice your first inclination. Do you want to fix what you notice? Do you want to narrate and list it, my personal favorite? Do you find yourself wanting to analyze it, judge it, avoid it, change it? Whatever you notice, the noticing is your win. Just be curious about your default reaction to what you notice. And when you do this, you're going to be deepening your awareness in a practice that will get you so much further towards change.

Now, I want to pair on to this some action-oriented questions. So here are three that I think are really wonderful.

Number one, if I trusted what I'm feeling right now didn't need to be fixed or changed, what would I do next?

Number two, if I believed there was no wrong way to feel, how would I respond to myself?

Number three, what's one tiny action I could take that honors what I just noticed?

And listen, you don't need perfect answers. You don't need to get it just right. Just pick something small and let that be enough. So let's recap. Awareness is essential if you want to make any changes in your life. And it's simple in theory, but it's not always easy in real life, in the ordinary trenches of getting out the door. And awareness is more than just noticing

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thoughts. It's about paying attention to your body, to the different parts of your system, to your patterns with compassion and with curiosity and care.

And awareness is not about fixing yourself or changing what's going on. It's about seeing yourself and paying attention to what's actually there. And this may be something you need to hear 10 times over, and I sure did. So let me just say it again. Awareness is not about the intellectual understanding. It's not about intellectualizing or analyzing what you notice. It's about meeting yourself where you are. And most importantly, awareness paired with care is what will create the conditions for real and sustainable change.

So as you go forward this week, keep turning on that light, but broaden that light to include things that are more than just intellectually noticing your thinking. And stay curious, stay kind to yourself, and trust that every small moment of noticing really does matter.

So, if this type of reflection resonates with you, if you are curious to learn more and you want more support applying these ideas in your real life, I want to invite you to something that's really special coming up soon. Starting July 7th, 2025, if you're listening to this in real time, which is about one week before the next round of Habits on Purpose for Physicians Small Group Coaching starts, I'm hosting a free week event that is called From Awareness to Action Week.

Now, during that week, you will get live teaching calls from me, some group coaching discussion and Q&A sessions, access to a private online community, and a private podcast feed where we'll have all the replays from the calls. And this week is designed to help you take these types of ideas that I share here and actually apply them and implement them in everyday life. And this is so you can feel more in the driver's seat of your own life, no matter what comes your way.

And if you've been considering joining the next round of Habits on Purpose for Physician Small Group Coaching, from Awareness to Action Week will give you a real feel for the kind of longer-term personalized support and community that you'll find inside the program. So if you're somebody who

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struggles with overthinking, self-doubt, people-pleasing, perfectionism, procrastination, or just feeling like you're stuck in the same old patterns despite your best efforts, this free week is designed just for you.

You can learn more and sign up at habitsonpurpose.com/preview. And if you're interested in learning more about Habits on Purpose for Physicians Small Group Coaching, you can go to habitsonpurpose.com/hopp. That's hop with two Ps, H O P P. And thank you 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.