

Ep #181 : Why Change Feels Hard: Revisiting the Idea of Thinking New Thoughts



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With Your Host

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Have you ever been told or told yourself that all you need to do to change is just think a better thought? That you're the one choosing your thoughts, and if you're not feeling better, it's because you are choosing the wrong ones?

Well, that's the story that I used to tell. And back in episode 13 of the podcast, I taught the skill of thinking a new thought and rehearsing it until you believed it. And I taught this as a cornerstone for change.

And while that skill can still be extremely useful, I now see how incomplete that story was and how it can actually backfire. So today we're revisiting that idea through the lens of what I've learned since then. Why thought work can help and why it's not enough. Why it can even harm when it's misused, and how to relate to your thoughts with more depth and compassion, and clarity. So if you've ever tried to just think better thoughts and wondered why it felt hollow or difficult or maybe even harmful, this episode is for you.

Welcome to Habits On Purpose. I'm Kristi Angevine, a physician, master certified coach, internal family systems informed practitioner, and host to this podcast, where we explore the deeper psychology behind why we do what we do. This is episode 181, Why Change Feels Hard: Revisiting the Idea of Thinking New Thoughts.

Hello, hello everybody. Lately, I have really enjoyed, I mean seriously, enjoyed so much it's hard to put to words, looking back on what I first learned when I initially discovered coaching and personal development, and noticing what's stayed the same and what's shifted. I actually really like looking back at old journals and reading just how I phrased things, how I framed things, what I was going through.

So when I look back at the original early episodes in the podcast, one of the most major differences between when I was first learning and teaching this craft and today is the role that I had cognition playing. The first and most compelling paradigm that landed for me was this: Cognition, our

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thoughts, interpretations, beliefs, the narratives, the stories that we told, these were the primary creators of everything we experienced in life.

And there was a very specific, undeniable sequence that went like this: The way we thought created our emotions, and these thought-emotion duos became the sole determinants of what we did and didn't do. And when you added up all of our actions and all of our inactions, each which were infused with their underlying thoughts and feelings, the sum total of this equation became our lived experience. It became how we saw ourselves, the world, and how we moved through it.

And from this perspective, there were not deviations from the sequence. Thought first, feeling second, actions third, and then the results, they were always created by our thinking and nothing else. Which meant if you wanted to feel better, do something differently, accomplish a goal, or experience life in a certain way, the heart of the issue was always a sentence in your mind. And since there's no rule about what you can or cannot think, this meant you had full choice, full agency. You could think whatever you want to drive whatever results you wanted.

And this paradigm was incredibly appealing. It was a lifetime guarantee of agency, no matter what life threw at you. It was elegant, simple, yet it had some nuances. And its power eclipsed the limitations, at least at first. So when I had this cognitive behavioral therapy paradigm, this thought, feeling, action lens on, I could not see the blind spots.

But now, six years later, I can see that things are far more complex than what I originally realized. Our experience is shaped by more than how we choose to think and by more than how we unintentionally view the world.

Our thoughts, our cognition, is just one layer. And it's a layer that's informed by and intertwined with our nervous system, our implicit memories, trauma, protective and adaptive strategies that were formed through our lived experiences, socialization, epigenetics, and all the inherited ideas that we carry from our families and our history. Our embodied experience matters.

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This primacy of cognition to the exclusion of all other things was really highlighted in one of the early episodes of the podcast, episode 13. So, let's check it out. Back in episode 13, I framed "thinking a new thought." If you could see me now, you'd see me doing some air quotes, as this foundational skill, a cornerstone for changing habits.

And at the time, this was my sincere belief because it was what I knew, and it helped me, and it helped many of my clients make progress. So here are a few of the things that I taught then, almost verbatim. I taught, to change a habit, you must change what you're habitually telling yourself.

Thoughts create feelings, feelings drive actions, actions create our lived experience, and therefore, what we think creates our experience.

I taught that we can literally think any thought that we want, and no one can stop you from thinking anything you want in your mind. And I taught that your habits don't reveal who you are so much as what you are thinking.

And from that, I went on to teach people that if you wanted to feel differently, you just needed to practice noticing your default thoughts, picking a more neutral or positive thought, and rehearsing it until it felt natural. And to be fair, this approach can be extremely helpful in certain circumstances up to a point. But it also has some limitations and some potential harms when it's used as a global, blunt instrument.

So let's talk about the limitations of this original approach I had. When you hold the thought, feeling, action, idea, or the paradigm of cognitive behavioral therapy as the end-all be-all, the ultimate solution, here are some problems that it can lead to.

Clients can make themselves wrong for having thoughts that they shouldn't have. Coaches and therapists can inadvertently gaslight clients by suggesting that their suffering is just because they're choosing bad thoughts.

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People can bypass trauma or deeper emotional wounds because they're told they should think differently. People can ignore real structural and systemic, cultural obstacles, biases, systems of oppression by believing that everything they experience comes down solely to the thoughts in their head. And then you can have people thinking that if they can't believe a new thought yet, they must not be trying hard enough. And this can breed shame, where people are thinking, I know what I should do, all I need is a better thought. What is wrong with me that I can't get this?

So what I've learned is that you can honor the usefulness of this cognitive approach and still acknowledge that there are some limitations, especially when it's used to bulldoze over some deeper truths.

So I want to frame this by using a metaphor that shapes how I think about this now. Imagine you have a map and a set of written directions that help you get from point A to point B. And one way to get from point A to point B is to take the shortest distance, but that might take you through all these things you don't want to go through, like a field of blackberry brambles, a swamp, a broken-down road with all sorts of potholes, maybe past a part of town you don't want to go through.

So instead of going through that as the crow would fly, you can go around all these obstacles and think, okay, I'm going to take the path that goes around the blackberry brambles, goes around the swamp, and definitely don't want to take that old forest service road that has half of it's been washed out. So I'm going to go this other route.

Once you do that route for a while, you might think, okay, this actually isn't working as well as I'd like. I would rather go a much smoother route. Wouldn't it be nice if I just had a superhighway that could just traverse over the top of all these obstacles and get me from point A to point B so much more easily? So, you build your superhighway. It is smooth, it is fast, it is efficient, and it just goes right over all these obstacles.

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And you get from point A to point B so much faster than going the long route and going around things. You actually get where you want to go just fine. And that can feel really great for a while. But what happens when that superhighway closes for construction? There you are again. You're looking at this long route, or you're looking at going through the swamp, the brambles, the broken road.

So the environment you're navigating is your own system. In the world of habits and mindset, building a superhighway is the equivalent of trying to find better thoughts to get away from the obstacles that are there. It's a workaround. It lets you get over or avoid uncomfortable terrain that's inside of you. The messy emotions, old pain, shame, grief, and it works fine until it doesn't.

And this is because the superhighway, it doesn't actually get to why those things are there in your way. It doesn't tell the story of how come there are these things that make it tricky to get through from point A to point B. The swamp, the brambles, they don't go away just because you stop looking at them or you find a way to go around them.

And this is kind of what thought work and a primacy of our “cognition creates everything” paradigm can do. It finds the smoothest route over the things that are really difficult without actually addressing the heart of the issue.

So this is how I see things now. Today, I still believe that thinking new thoughts are useful, but that's definitely not the whole story. So if I were to rewrite those earlier ideas, this is how I would put it.

So the old idea was to change a habit, you must change what you're habitually telling yourself. The new idea is to change a habit and what you're habitually telling yourself, you must understand why you're telling yourself that stuff in the first place.

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Which part of you are these thoughts coming from? And how do these thoughts make sense? So the old way was, thoughts create feelings, feelings drive actions, and actions create everything about our lived experience.

The new take is, our thoughts indeed can influence and strongly shape our feelings, our actions, and our whole experience. But so do the parts of you that are behind those thoughts. So does your nervous system. So do your protective and adaptive strategies, and all the cultural systems you live in have a downstream impact.

The old take: We can literally think any thought we want, and no one can stop us from thinking something in our mind. The current take is, yes, you can absolutely think anything you would like. And if you can't think the right thought yet, the thought that helps you feel better, that doesn't mean that you're failing. It often means there's something deeper there calling for your attention.

The old approach: Habits do not reveal who we are so much as what we are thinking. My new take: Habits don't reveal who we are so much as which parts of us, which protective, adaptive strategies are most prominent at the time.

So, rather than paving over the top of your internal terrain, the invitation now is to get curious about it. Instead of looking for a new thought to feel better, what is going on with the proverbial swamp? Why is that road unmaintained in the first place? Are those blackberry brambles just in need of some pruning, or is there more to the story here? When you understand the obstacles, instead of sidestepping them, you don't have to work so hard to navigate your inner environment. You don't have to go spend all the time, money, and effort to build a superhighway. You can just understand how to navigate the things that do seem like obstacles in the first place.

So, this brings me to, what do we do instead? If you are familiar with this approach of the way I think, the stories I tell really does influence my

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experience, but you've run up against some limits to that. The next time you notice yourself trying to bulldoze your way to a better thought, I want you to pause. And just ask, "Which part of me is offering this thought that I'd like to change? What might this thought be protecting me from feeling? Or how might it be helping me adapt?"

And then finally, ask yourself, why might it feel safer to stay on the superhighway than to walk through the swamp? Why might it feel safer to find a new thought than to just be with what's presently here for me right now?

Because the truth is, you don't have to fix or eliminate any of your adaptive strategies, any of the ways that you've learned to navigate the world in the past. But what can be beneficial is to simply start understanding these strategies.

So, if ever you notice the reflex to try to find a reframe, a better way of looking at things, and you find that strategy is falling flat, pause and ask yourself, why is it I think I need to think differently about this right now? What am I afraid is going to happen if I just meet myself where I'm at and notice what's behind this thought? And just see what comes up for you.

So if you are like me and you have been taught for a long time that your thoughts are everything, and PS, our thinking really is powerful. But if you've been taught that they explain everything, it may make sense that you have worked hard up to this point to curate your thoughts deliberately. And it also makes sense that you may be doing this at the expense of examining and healing and addressing some of the deeper things that might be blocking you from the change you really hoped for.

So if you've struggled with changing your mindset, please note it's not a sign that you're broken or you're failing or you're not doing thought work right. It simply means that you're ready for a different way to traverse your inner landscape. You might just need a different type of map, a different set of tools. And what helps the most is when we can understand our internal

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terrain, not just pave over our internal terrain. You deserve more than a workaround. You deserve a path where you don't have to sidestep things, but one that honors all the parts of you, even the ones that seem like they're easier to avoid.

So I hope getting that compare and contrast from what I originally learned when I first found my way to coaching to where I found myself today was useful for you. And if you notice that you're wanting help navigating your own terrain, your own habits, exploring things maybe with more compassion and curiosity, so you can get to some deeper understanding, I just want to invite you to join me in the current round of Habits On Purpose for Physicians. The enrollment is open for a little bit longer, and we are kicking off with our orientation sessions and our first calls right as this podcast is going out.

So if you want to learn more and sign up, you can go to habitsonpurpose.com/hopp, that's hopp with two Ps. And if there are still spots available, the link will be live and you can sign up. If we are full, because we keep the group small in order for everyone to get personalized attention, if we're full, we'll have the waitlist link live for you.

And then, if you enjoy this podcast, it would mean so much to me if you would consider leaving a review or sharing it with somebody who you think could benefit. So I hope you found this valuable, and until next week, be kind to yourself.

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.