

Ep #182: Rethinking How to Feel Better



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With Your Host

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Ep #182: Rethinking How to Feel Better

Maybe you've told yourself, if I could just manage my emotions better, everything would fall into place. Maybe you've heard that your emotions come from your thoughts, and the key to feeling better is to identify the thoughts behind your feelings and shift them.

While there's some truth to that approach, there are also some important missing pieces. In fact, sometimes trying to control or fix how you think and feel can actually backfire.

In today's episode, we'll talk about what emotions really are, how they affect our habits, and a powerful shift in how you relate to your emotions that can change everything. If you've ever felt like you should be able to manage your emotions better, or if your old patterns haven't budged despite your best efforts, 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 of this podcast, where we explore the deeper psychology behind why we do what we do.

This is episode 182: Rethinking How to Feel Better.

Hello, hello, everyone. I am very excited to bring you this episode. This particular topic, emotions and how we actually feel better, has been something that I've been fascinated by since I first discovered this work.

When it comes to changing patterns, the role our emotions have is complex. And my personal understanding of this interplay between how we feel and what we do continues to evolve and deepen the more I learn. Today, I'm going to elaborate on what emotions are, how we usually respond to them, and how they're related to our habits and patterns.

Now, over the years on the podcast, I've discussed why understanding emotions is such an important part of habit change. And in fact, one of the most popular early episodes was one called, "How to Feel Better." It was actually a two-part series, "How to Feel Better, Part 1 and Part 2," in episode 6 and 7.

Ep #182: Rethinking How to Feel Better

And today's episode revisits those foundational ideas and looks at the role emotions have in our lives and how they affect our habits. Now, when I listened back to how I explained things back in 2022, I realized that there are some things that stood the test of time and other things that I currently explain differently. So, rather than a companion episode, today's episode is a refresher, plus a little bit of an addendum, reflecting the evolution of my thinking.

It's "How to Feel Better, the second edition." And it's also an invitation to you to revisit what you think about emotions and habits for yourself.

Now, I'll just share, when I was listening to this old episode, I put my AirPods in, I was going for a little bit of a walk, and sometimes listening to my voice is easy for me, and other times it brings up a lot of different parts of me and feels a bit surreal. And this time, it brought up a part of me that would cringe hearing my voice when I would listen to our home answering machine message, and it was just kind of funny to experience cringing like I was back in time, 30-something years, while I was listening to something that was only a few years old.

Now, the first thing that struck me when I was listening back to episode 6 was, I was going on to say that I was going to explain why emotions were important, and I was going to, in the episode, describe how we usually handle them. And as I listened to that, I think March 2022 voice of mine, I was really struck to hear myself use the word "handle" as I referred to how we usually handle emotions.

Now, this might just seem like a tiny little thing, just semantics, but it was actually very telling of the unspoken way that I was seeing emotions. Think about it. What types of things do we handle? We handle problems, hiccups, inconveniences, things we want to fix or get past. If we draw the short straw, we are told, "Ha, you get to handle it."

So, from here looking back, I now see that a part of me back then really viewed emotions, especially the uncomfortable ones, as things to be handled, managed, controlled, examined, so that they could be fixed.

Ep #182: Rethinking How to Feel Better

Today, I would not use the word handle. When I talk about emotions today, I talk about relating to our emotions, and that's a big difference.

We relate to things that we're willing to be in relationship with. We relate to things that we respect, even if we don't always understand. And that shift from dealing with or managing emotions to relating to them is at the heart of what's changed in how I think about this topic.

So let's dive in with a little review of some of the fundamental ideas, and then I'm going to do a little compare and contrast to what I thought in the past and what I think now.

In the past, I taught that emotions are the physical feelings in the body that come from the way we think. They're the physiologic affect that comes from cognition. When I think the thought, "Oh no, there's not enough time," I feel overwhelmed. When I think, "You know, I've got this," I feel sturdy and resourceful.

I actually really loved hearing my old self describe emotions like little teachers signaling to us the way to better see the different thoughts that precede the emotions, to see the ideas or beliefs or socialized programming that we have deeply internalized as a fundamental paradigm or lens through which we see ourselves and the world. This is one of those statements that it's true and there's more to the story.

The way I understood emotions back then was that if we wanted to understand why we felt a certain way, we needed to trace the breadcrumbs of our emotions back to our thinking and identify the sentence in our mind that created the feeling. And that cognitive behavioral therapy paradigm, it's not completely wrong. It's just only one piece of the whole story.

So here's how I see emotions and their relation to our habits now. Emotions can be influenced by our thoughts, but they're not just the downstream products of cognition. Emotions are complex responses that are shaped by our nervous system state, implicit memories, trauma, socialization, and cultural messaging, parts of us that carry burdens or protective roles,

Ep #182: Rethinking How to Feel Better

epigenetics, family history, and yes, our thoughts, but thoughts that are embedded in a much bigger ecosystem.

In fact, I now often describe emotions as psychological shorthand. You know how when you walk into a room of people and you immediately have a certain emotion, you feel a certain way? That immediate felt sense contains the countless micro assessments that our system is making about whether something feels safe or something feels threatening. We can't consciously process every data point, every variable. We would take hours to do the simplest task.

So the emotion that we feel is a psychological shorthand. We feel the summary of our brain's sophisticated evaluation. And what's fascinating is the summary isn't always predictable. Do you ever have emotions that just don't necessarily make rational or logical sense?

One day, we go into a meeting and our confident department chair persona is leading the way, and even the most complicated issues are a breeze. But the next week, in a similar meeting, the self-conscious middle schooler in us and that uptight perfectionist that needs two hours of thinking time before responding, well, they're at the wheel.

If sentences in our mind were the only things that we had to alter to radically change from overthinking self-consciousness to feeling confident in a work meeting, a sticky note with a reminder on our mirror in the morning would do the trick. But the reason that doesn't work is the bigger ecosystem that shapes our emotions encompasses the complexity of our past experiences, our autonomic nervous system, implicit memory, and schemas, all mixed in with the quietly internalized ways that society has taught us to think and taught us to be. This is the context from which our emotions emerge.

Then, when we bring in Internal Family Systems to look at emotions, we can start to recognize that different emotions often arrive from different parts of us. That sharp, reactive disdain, well, that might be coming from your inner rebel. That wave of worry about your outfit, maybe that's your

Ep #182: Rethinking How to Feel Better

inner seventh grader worried about being judged and excluded in the cafeteria.

When we can contextualize our emotions as coming from different parts or subparts of us, we can appreciate that there's a richness to why emotions show up when they do. So, instead of simply a repeated way of thinking that corresponds to a situational cue, our emotions arise depending on what part of us shows up.

All of this explains why in one situation we can feel calm and resourceful, and in another almost identical situation, we feel defensive and overwhelmed. It's not just about the situation. It's not just what we're thinking about the situation. It's about which of our inner strategies is surfacing and leading the way.

Now, let's shift to talking about how we respond to or, as I used to say, how we handle our emotions. In the past, I always taught there were three common ways we would deal with emotions. We would react, avoid or numb, or resist them.

So let me just describe all three of these. To react to emotions is to be overtaken by the emotion and to yell or to snap. To avoid or to numb an emotion, it's to eat food, use your screen, or busy yourself so that you don't have to feel the emotion. And resisting an emotion is that tightening, bracing, trying not to feel, judging a feeling, suppressing it, trying to fix it, trying to get away from it in some way by resisting it.

Now, I still think these are pretty accurate descriptors for what we usually do in response to an emotion, but what I now appreciate better is why we respond this way. These strategies for how we respond to big feelings, they make so much sense. We flinch from emotional discomfort the same way we would pull our hand away from a hot stove. We seek soothing psychologically, just like we do physically. When we get bumped off of our balance when we're on a bike, we naturally adjust to right ourselves, and emotionally we do similarly. So to react, resist, to numb, and distract, these are very understandable strategies.

Ep #182: Rethinking How to Feel Better

And if you add to this the idea that we have different associations with certain emotions, it makes even more sense. So if you grew up and feelings and emotions were not a welcomed part of your existence and you heard, "Turn that frown upside down," or, "There's no crying in baseball," you probably didn't learn how to be with your feelings so much as to get away from them, and to get away from them as much as possible.

Or, if emotions like overwhelm or feeling sad or ashamed, if they were ever associated with a threat to physical or relational safety, of course, you'd develop strategies to escape these types of feelings.

What I used to see is just common responses to emotions, I now see as responses that come from the protective parts of us that are doing their best to keep us in a state of homeostasis. If we have a flash of shame when we're at work, a protective strategy to not be engulfed by shame is to busy yourself in charts or Candy Crush.

If we're good at thinking our way out of anything, when we have an inconvenient emotion, of course we're going to swoop in and try to fix it by dismissing it or reminding ourselves that it's nothing compared to other people's struggles or trying to find a silver lining or telling ourselves, "You know, I'm just thinking about this in such a negative way."

So it's for all these reasons that understanding emotions is a bit of a mystery that we piece together by paying really close attention. Just like paleontologists piece together ideas about what happened in the past by looking at physical artifacts, we can understand why we do what we do when we look at the different ways we respond to our emotions.

Now, let's take all this and shift into the interplay between emotions and habits. I used to teach that our habits were simply related to how we wanted to feel and how we didn't want to feel. And I understood that we did everything either to avoid a feeling or to get a feeling or for a feeling that we thought we might have, as in, if I don't want to feel restless, I will start busying myself or scrolling. And all of this is partially true, but it's only one piece to the puzzle.

Ep #182: Rethinking How to Feel Better

So let's take perfectionism as an example. On the surface, it might look like a habituated strategy to avoid feeling shame. So if you don't want to feel shame, you'll do everything perfectly so that you won't fail. But more deeply, perfectionism is better understood as a long-standing protective strategy, a way to perhaps prevent rejection, criticism, or feeling not enough, a strategy that may have formed when making mistakes felt genuinely or literally unsafe during childhood, during training, or in a moment of high-stakes vulnerability.

So today I'd say our habits and patterns aren't just about chasing good feelings and avoiding bad ones. Our habits are shaped by lived experience and refined over time in order to be adaptive or protective to keep us from what once felt unbearable, even if those same unbearable consequences aren't actually as risky today as they were in the past. And this insight changes everything.

Emotions aren't just responses to our current situation based on our current way of thinking. Emotions are peepholes back in time to when strategies formed, likely in situations that are vaguely similar to the here and now. I tell my clients that sometimes our emotions don't make sense because they're less connected to the current circumstances we're facing as a 45-year-old person and more related to whatever the 8-year-old version of us faced. And this is why some of our habits and involuntary patterns can feel a little bit immature, a little bit simple. Because often, we learned a certain approach or strategy or way of being way back when we literally were quite young and simply not very mature.

So with all this in mind, here's how I think about emotions and habits now. Our habits reflect the strategies developed by all the different parts of us. And those strategies formed from how we learned to navigate past experiences and relate to the emotional imprints of those past experiences. Our emotions are psychological shorthand. They aren't just breadcrumbs leading us back to a catalog of thoughts and beliefs, but rather they're messengers that reveal the interplay of our nervous system, socialization, beliefs, burdens, as well as our unspoken fears and perhaps unmet needs.

Ep #182: Rethinking How to Feel Better

So what to do with all this stuff about emotions? Well, I used to advise slowing down, naming the emotion, and noticing how that emotion felt physically in your body until you could systematically, rationally examine what you were feeling to find the thinking behind the feeling. And I still think that's a reasonable approach sometimes. Today, I recommend adding in an additional step that I find to be really crucial.

So instead of just naming the emotion by saying, "I feel overwhelmed," say this, "A part of me feels overwhelmed." That small shift with "a part of me," using the language of parts, helps create psychological space. So, just like holding your hand at arm's length gives you more clarity about how your hand looks than when your hand is two inches from your face, naming a part helps you step into an observer role where you can see an emotion just as one part of you and not all of you. And this helps you not become the emotion and see the world through the eyes of the part that's consumed by this emotion.

And with this space, you can then ask questions and expand the space. You can ask, "How do I feel about having this emotion? How do I feel toward the part of me with this emotion?" Maybe, "What does the part of me with this feeling need?" And, "Can I be curious or compassionate?"

Now, bonus advanced move here, sometimes when you do this and say, "A part of me feels," in the space that you create will come another feeling. Maybe if you're overwhelmed and you say, "A part of me feels overwhelmed," and you get a little space, maybe you instantly notice anger shows up, or worry that the overwhelm is never going to end. These co-occurring emotions are like actors standing in the wings waiting to come on stage. And this can explain why a simple emotion that just seems like one thing on the surface can feel so different one day to the next. Overwhelm plus compassion is totally different than overwhelm plus anger and worry, you know?

So, by adding in "a part of me feels blank," we can shift from seeing emotions as events that we have to handle to responding to them kind of like we might respond to people. So instead of needing to learn to live with

Ep #182: Rethinking How to Feel Better

emotions like you would, I don't know, learn to live with the way your car lurches you forward when you hit a speed bump too fast, when you use the language of parts and you bring in some care and curiosity about your emotions, you cultivate a way of relating to your experience that's as rich as an interpersonal relationship that you have with another person. And when you can do this with your own emotions, this is how you begin to change, not by force, but by connection. And this approach is just so practical, and it works so much more effectively than strong-arming your feelings.

So for example, you can try every hack out there to solve your procrastination, overwhelm, and perfectionism. You can Google every remedy and try them all. But if you were to learn that your present-day procrastination traces back to say, a part of you that felt like you didn't belong and worried you'd get in trouble if you didn't do things just right, you're going to go about changing your procrastination with so much more than just a new planner.

So if you want to learn how to actually feel better, you don't need to learn how to handle your emotions better, even though I used to think that was the secret. To navigate the complexity that is being a human actually calls on us to stop seeing emotions as problems that we need to fix and instead start seeing them as invitations to listen.

Our emotions are shaped by our lived experience, all the inner protective strategies that we've developed, and the full story of how we got to become who we are today. And when we can relate to emotions instead of suppressing or analyzing them away, we start to build a different type of inner relationship with ourselves, one that's not based on control or managing, but one that's based on trust. And that is actually the secret, the counterintuitive idea that opens the door to meaningful and sustainable habit change.

So if you're curious about this way of tending to habit change and relating to your emotions, or if you've ever felt stuck in old patterns that you can't quite think your way out of, I'd love to invite you to keep exploring this by continuing to listen to the podcast. And if you haven't already, join the

Ep #182: Rethinking How to Feel Better

Habits on Purpose email list. And if you feel moved to, scroll down, leave a rating, leave a review, just a phrase or two, and let me know what you thought of this episode. I hope this topic was useful, and I will talk to you next week.

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