

Ep #183: The Power of Validation: The Unsung Hero of Habit Change



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With Your Host

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Have you ever thought that acknowledging things you struggle with or find challenging might make those things worse? Maybe you've been told that validating how you feel is indulgent, self-pitying, or just an excuse to stay stuck. But what if validation is the very opposite of that? What if it's actually one of the most powerful tools you can use to unlock clarity, confidence, and the umph to effectively create change?

Well, in this episode, we'll explore what validation actually is and what it isn't. We'll name some myths, talk about why invalidation is so harmful, and break down what it looks like to validate in real life so you can leverage it in a way that builds self-trust, deepens connection, and supports the habit change you actually want in a way that actually lasts.

Welcome to Habits on Purpose. I'm Kristi Angevine, 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 183. And it's all about the power of validation, the unsung hero of habit change.

Hello, hello everyone. Well, first off, I'm just going to name the fact that my voice is really scratchy. It's like I've been at some sporting event, like yelling for my favorite team. So if you hear a little bit of a scratchy frog in my throat, that is why. And forgive me, hopefully, it is not too much of a distraction.

So recently, I was sharing something with a friend and she said, "Oh my gosh, Kristi, that is so hard." And my usual response to receiving sympathy from someone is to jump in and correct them and say something like, "Oh no, it's not that bad. I mean, at least XYZ is happening and, you know, the good thing about this is blah, blah, blah. I've actually learned this and that, etc., etc."

So instead of just really absorbing the comment as maybe an observation of a fact, a part of me will jump in to dismantle the sympathy and point out that actually things are great, things are fine, it's really good, it's actually

Ep #183: The Power of Validation: The Unsung Hero of Habit Change

perfect that things are like this. But when my friend said, "Kristi, that's hard. That sounds hard." I didn't jump in.

Let me keep this really real here. One of the reasons I didn't jump in was because I was listening to a voice memo and we had this asynchronous connection. It wasn't live, so I didn't have the opportunity to jump in. But what struck me in that moment was how her statement landed, how it felt. And because I wasn't live and I couldn't do my usual, I had this opportunity to experience things very differently, and I felt so validated. I felt seen. I felt like someone got it, agreed my difficulty was reasonable, legitimate, and at the same time, that friend of mine, she wasn't bothered or undone by my difficulty.

It was almost like someone was saying, "Oh yeah, I get it. The last mile of the race, yeah, that's just hard." Or, "you know that exercise with that weight? Oh my gosh, that's so difficult." And there was a matter-of-factness to her comment that was so liberating. And I noticed I felt empowered.

Now, had I poked holes in that acknowledgment of something being difficult, I would have missed feeling seen and feeling sturdier. So, I want to share my reflections about the power of validation because it's something we all superficially get, but might not really sit with long enough to realize how very important it is. So let's start with a simple definition. Validation means to acknowledge and affirm something as real, legitimate, and understandable. And that's it.

So why is naming something as real, legitimate, and understandable so useful? Well, because without that basic acknowledgment of our internal experience, we can feel like we're in this psychological straitjacket. When we struggle without validation, we are blind to what is hard, and thus, we don't even know why we are struggling.

It's not talked about much, but validation is one of the fastest ways to access your natural strengths. It's the fastest route to clarity, confidence, creativity, persistence, and courage, what I call the big five. It's deceptively

Ep #183: The Power of Validation: The Unsung Hero of Habit Change

simple. And yet in practice, it really does unlock internal permission to move forward. So let's talk about why.

Most of us have been taught the opposite. We've been taught that validation is just agreement, and thus, it's kind of approval or permission for bad behavior. It's pity, it's indulgent, it's basically milking it. And it's making a big deal out of nothing. And it's also risky. You'll get stuck in how things are if you validate how hard they are, so don't validate too much.

Now, none of that is true. Let's break this down a little further by contrasting validation with invalidation. Invalidation is the act of acknowledging something as not real, not valid, not sensible, not legitimate, otherwise known as illegitimate. It is communicating this is wrong, unimportant, unacceptable. This is an exaggeration of reality, and this is unwelcome.

So let's just sort of keep this really concrete. What does invalidation sound like? It sounds like, "This is ridiculous. That's just a wrong way of thinking. There's no reason to react that way. Frankly, you're being dramatic. It's not a big deal. You're fine. Just get over it. You shouldn't feel that way. You're being too sensitive. Other people have it worse. What are you even complaining about?"

And sometimes invalidation can be sneaky, and it looks like well-meaning logic. "That kind of reaction is just going to get you into trouble. Think about how things would be in the future if that happened later." Or you might hear sneaky invalidation with, "If you just think about it this way," or what I call the rational lawyer approach, "If you did this reaction in other places, just imagine what it would cause." Or, "You should stop feeling this way right now because if you don't, it's going to cause even bigger problems." Or, "Think of what so-and-so would do."

Invalidation can also show up as an omission of acknowledgment. In other words, it can show up as silence. Somebody pretends to listen, somebody dismisses, gives lip service, doesn't pay attention to, or looks away.

Ep #183: The Power of Validation: The Unsung Hero of Habit Change

Now, the examples I'm giving here are other people offering invalidation, or what it might sound like when we offer invalidation to someone else. But just notice, these same types of things can be directed towards ourselves. And when we direct it towards ourselves, we mutter underneath our breath, "This is ridiculous. I shouldn't act like this. I'm just being so dramatic. I really shouldn't feel this way. It's just so sensitive. Other people wouldn't feel like this." "When I do this, all it does is make things worse. What is my problem?" Or we push something to the side, we don't acknowledge it. Almost like if I don't look, maybe I won't have to see what's there.

Now, invalidation subtly or overtly says, you can't trust your feelings. Your needs or reactions, they are a problem. And there's something wrong with you. And those things, they are the ingredients in a recipe for shame, shutdown, and self-doubt.

Now, let's compare this to validation, which conveys, I see you. What you are feeling makes sense. Your experience really matters. You are not wrong or bad for feeling this way. And your reactions are real, understandable, and welcome.

When you receive validation from another person, you give validation to someone else, or you give the validation to yourself; it does not mean that you are stuck in a vortex of rehashing things or wallowing or exaggerating how hard things are. It just means you're simply acknowledging this is what's here right now. And this makes sense. This is understandable, and it is reasonable for things to feel difficult. It is reasonable for things to feel as they feel.

So take a minute. What is it like when you feel validated? Now, let's talk about why validation matters for habit change. When we invalidate what is genuinely difficult or present for us, we invalidate our experience, which means we make it as if our experience is not reasonable, understandable, or real. And when we do that, we end up missing the deeper wisdom that is beneath our habits.

Ep #183: The Power of Validation: The Unsung Hero of Habit Change

When we invalidate what we're struggling with, it's almost like we're putting a blanket over our struggle so we can't see it. And when we can't see our struggle, then when we have certain coping behaviors to deal with that struggle, it's very easy to judge ourselves. We judge ourselves for procrastinating or snapping at our partner or binge watching Netflix because we can't see what's actually difficult and what we're solving for.

Judgment is a product of invalidation. Judgment comes when we miss what our coping behaviors are solving for. And when we do this chronically, we reinforce the idea that we can't trust ourselves, that our experience is wrong or bad, and that the way we cope is also wrong and bad. But when we validate, we're simply opening our eyes and seeing what's real. And when we do that, it can be profoundly grounding and empowering.

So let's just talk about what validation can look like in real life. Here are some sound bites to try on to see what validation can sound like when you're speaking this to somebody else or when you're telling yourself. Let me say that again. Or when you're talking to yourself about what you're going through. "That sounds really hard. I believe you. It makes so much sense you'd feel that way. No wonder you're overwhelmed. It's tricky being in this kind of situation. Wow, that is a lot. I'm hearing X. Am I getting that right?"

And when you're validating your own experience, you can ask things like, "If I'm being really honest right now, what is hard about this for me? What's at stake here? What's the deeper fear? What's the concern? What's the need I have? And is there anything I've been dismissing or minimizing?"

Validation helps us all feel seen, heard, understood, and like we make sense and are appreciated. Now, there are some common blocks to validation, and this means blocks to receiving validation, blocks to giving validation, and blocks to validating your own experience. And I want to outline these so that you can watch for them and then notice them when they're there.

Ep #183: The Power of Validation: The Unsung Hero of Habit Change

So some barriers for validation can sound like this. You might think to yourself, "You know, this is just a first-world problem. I really shouldn't feel this way. I'm just being whiny. Other people have it so much harder. You know what? If I acknowledge this, I'm just going to wallow here. I'm never going to move on." You might notice yourself idealizing others and think, "They wouldn't be bothered with this, so what is my problem?" Or you might fear that validation of your own experience will just prove how weak you are.

But here's the truth. Validation does not trap you. It frees you. Validation is simply a business-like notation of what is present and what is real. And when you acknowledge what is present and real, you don't have to twist yourself into knots to pretend you're okay. You don't have to get away from or force yourself to smile when you're actually miserable on the inside. And when you acknowledge what is present and real for someone else, then you don't have to rush in to fix things.

And when you do this, it builds self-trust. You can trust that if something feels hard, it is hard, and you can trust your feelings to indicate real things that are surfacing. When you have self-trust and can really just be eyes wide open about what is hard for you, that is when you have insight into why you have some of the coping strategies, some of the default patterns, and some of the habits you have. And when you can see some of the core reasons that drive your behaviors, that is when you can start making meaningful shifts.

So the next time you're struggling, whether it's with a habit you don't like, an emotion that feels overwhelming, or a pattern that just won't budge, I want you to try this on. Start by validating what is real. Start by validating what is difficult. Don't try to fix it, don't try to analyze it, don't try to write out a master plan for how to get from where you are to somewhere else. Just pause for a moment and notice what's going on and affirm that it makes sense. And if it doesn't make sense at first glance, you can just affirm, this doesn't make full sense to me right now. But I bet on some level, in some way, it's reasonable and does make sense.

Ep #183: The Power of Validation: The Unsung Hero of Habit Change

Because when you do this, you're no longer fighting yourself. You're finally just listening. And from this space, everything can change. So I hope this episode about validation landed for you in a way that can help you be open to validation from others, as well as be proactive about offering validation to yourself and perhaps to the other people in your life who you might need it.

Thank you so much for listening to this episode, and if it resonated with you, I would love it if you would take a few minutes, scroll down on your phone or device, and review the podcast or just even leave a rating. If you feel so moved to share it with somebody who needs to hear this type of message, that would just mean the world to me. And then if you want to go deeper into this type of work, check out the email list. You can go to habitsonpurpose.com. Or if you want to actually have support and community to apply these concepts in your real life, you can check out the small group coaching program at habitsonpurpose.com/HOPP. I'll see you next week.

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