

Ep #185: Why Stress Hijacks Your Brain and How to Pivot in the Moment



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With Your Host

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You know those times where things aren't going well? Life is going sideways and you are snapping at your people, you're overthinking, doom scrolling, you're eating all the snacks. And you actually know that things aren't going well, but it feels like you just can't stop. You just can't get out of things.

Well, today I'm talking about the neuroscience behind these patterns and how to leverage awareness, validation, and compassion to create tiny, meaningful pivots that become your lifeline in stressful moments. So let's dive right in.

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.

Hello, hello, everybody. So as I record this episode, I am in a very different place than I usually am. I want to just give you a little glimpse of things. So right now, I'm in Portugal. I'm in the town of Sintra. It's summer. It's quite hot. I've never been here before, and I've just started to get my bearings, being in a new time zone, different culture, unfamiliar town, et cetera. And I could spend the entire podcast describing the experience. But what I mainly want to say is this: The decision to come here with my family for a month through a program called Boundless Life has been a great one.

This program is designed for families who want to blend slow travel, school for your kids, remote work with just ordinary everyday life. And I am not being—nobody knows I'm saying anything about this program. This is not some sort of sponsored post, but I just enjoy this structure that this program provides so much that I want to give you just a little peephole into what it's like, in case it's something that really excites you to hear about.

They provided a place to live. You get school or AKA summer camp, as I'm thinking of it, for the kids. There's a co-working space, otherwise known as the hub for work. And there's all sorts of opportunities for interacting with and connecting with other families who are participating, like potlucks,

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games in the park, yoga, going to the beach together, walking tours of town. And it's built on the philosophy of living deliberately on your own terms, even if that might mean a radical departure from how many other people you know live their lives.

So some of the folks who participate in Boundless Life, they do three months at a time in one country, and then they relocate to another part of the world. So if you think you've got an interest in a bit of this kind of nomadic adventuring without having to do all the things on your own, the Boundless Life folks are totally worth checking out.

So this is a podcast episode from my temporary apartment in Portugal, and I'm bringing you something that's really relevant to what I'm going through right now and what many people around me are going through as they are either wrapping up their summers or have already just transitioned into maybe kids going back to school. And it is the topic of pivoting. And what I mean by pivoting is shifting gears, changing course, stepping back when you need it most.

So, have you ever been midway through your day and you suddenly realize that you are rushing? You are irritable, you haven't eaten, or maybe you have eaten all the things. You're curt with everyone, but you have no clue how to get settled. And then maybe you feel guilty, but because you don't know what to do to change things, you just plow ahead like it's the only option.

So even though you know you have a chip on your shoulder, finding calm feels impossible in these moments. Or maybe you catch yourself scrolling instead of doing the thing that you really care about, or arguing when you meant to be connecting. And intellectually, you might see all the things going sideways and know that you need a reset, but it's just out of reach. You don't actually know how to pivot in the moment in a way that's really meaningful.

So if you can relate, this is not because you're bad at adulting. It's just because your nervous system is doing the job it's designed to do. It's trying

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to protect you by keeping you in motion, keeping you braced or numbed out or whatever it's learned works best when you're overwhelmed. And the truth is, sometimes these strategies actually do help until they don't. Which is where this episode's topic comes in: how to pivot using awareness, validation, and compassion. These three ingredients, they combine to create more choice and agency, which are the things that are most missing when we are in the middle of a shit show.

So today we're going to talk about the psychology and the neuroscience of what happens when you're stressed and reactive, why pivoting is difficult even if you know you should, and how to leverage awareness and actually shift gears midstream without perfectionism, without shame, and without things having to get so bad that you can't help but collapse in order to change course.

So first off, what's really happening in your brain when you're overwhelmed and stuck in a stress loop? When you are tired, overwhelmed, feeling under pressure, your brain shifts into a survival mode. Executive functions like creative thinking, problem solving, impulse control, and having perspective, these things go offline. Instead, survival-oriented, reactive circuits take over, doing what they've always done to help you cope with strategies and responses that you learned over time, not consciously, not rationally, but through what's called implicit memory.

Implicit memory is a psychological equivalent of what we often refer to as muscle memory. So just like you have a kind of memory that helps you tie your shoes, drive home from work without thinking about the route, shift your weight when your bike hits a bump, or flinch before you even realize what startled you, implicit memory is what guides our psychological movements. And I'm drawing inspiration from the way Dr. Tory Olds teaches about implicit memory and psychological movements. So if you haven't checked her out, please go check her out.

But our psychological movements, these are the automatic ways we respond to emotions, conflict, stress, and relationships. And these

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responses, they're essentially encoded in neural networks, patterns of firing in the brain that get reinforced through repetition and lived experience.

So let's say you grew up learning that being quiet was a way to stay out of trouble, or that achieving made you more lovable, got you more attention, or that feeling sad and expressing it was dangerous or made others uncomfortable, made people withdraw. Your brain memorizes these experiences, particularly when they happen at young ages. And the next time something feels remotely similar, the same pattern runs instantly and unconsciously, which is why you might be the head of your department at work, yet you get a critical email and you suddenly feel like a 9-year-old in the principal's office. Or you start overperforming the moment you feel unappreciated. Or you freeze and go blank just when you really need to speak up.

These automatic responses, they're not personal flaws. They're just evidence of the brilliant way our brain and our nervous system work to protect us and adapt, even if the result in the present moment isn't so great. So when we are stressed, our brain prioritizes safety and efficiency. It wants safety and speed. And it's like the prefrontal cortex goes offline and we get more rigid and more reactive and less psychologically flexible. And this is when our oldest, tried and true strategies kick in. It's these strategies, which have a momentum that's responsible for the difficulty of pivoting when you're in the thick of them.

So here's where the skill of awareness, paired with validation and self-compassion, comes in. Now, before you roll your eyes or dismiss these ideas as vague or soft or pop psychology hacks, the research is clear. All three of these things are key to feeling agency and choice. So let's get into it. You cannot pivot unless you pause, pay attention, and notice what's happening for you. That is the first critical step. Then, if you want to access choice and more clearheadedness, you have to tend to what's happening with validation and self-compassion.

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It's kind of like if you have a fire in your kitchen, if you don't notice it, it's going to spread. But once you do notice it, you can't just stand there looking at it, aware but not acting. You have to do something. Here, that something is internal validation and self-compassion. So bring to mind that you are overwhelmed, undone, frayed, strung out, irritable, reactive.

Now, personally, I don't have to go back very far to recall an instance or 10 where this was going on for me. Now, imagine we could slow everything down, and as soon as you noticed how you felt, instead of adding insult to injury and getting more upset that you're having a hard time, imagine you paused and mentally noted to yourself one thing that you noticed.

It might sound like, I'm doing that thing again. My thoughts are racing. I just scrolled Instagram for 45 minutes and now I feel worse. I am so tired and cranky and trying to power through. I am 8 out of 10 stressed out. I took that so personally.

Now, imagine that you bring in validation and compassion on purpose. Validation on purpose is simply acknowledging what's present and how it makes sense. Compassion on purpose is kindness, normalization, and care.

So instead of saying, here I am again, thoughts racing, running around like I'm in a pressure cooker. What is my problem? Validation and compassion sound like, when my thoughts race, it's usually because I feel out of control, and no one likes to feel that way. Or, damn, it is hard to have a busy day at work, get stuck in traffic, and then have ornery kids upset with the dinner plan. No wonder I scrolled for 45 minutes. Or it makes sense I'm trying to power through. That's what worked in the past. Man, my brain is trying so hard to keep me safe, using what used to work even though it's not working right now. Thanks, brain.

The moment you notice and bring in validation and compassion, you have access to choosing the next best step. And that is a huge win. It's the difference between this isn't working, what's my problem? And it's hard when things aren't working. Let's adjust one thing. But let's keep this really

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real. When things are challenging, it's not easy to pivot. Pivoting is more an art form than just plug and play. And just because you know what you could do in order to pivot or reset, doesn't necessarily mean it's going to automatically happen, and that it's going to be easy to do in the moment.

So let's just talk about why it is that sometimes we remember what we could do intellectually, but we don't actually do it. This happens because once a stress response gets going, your brain does not want to stop. There's not an impetus to stop because a brain in a stress spiral has a job. It's there to protect you, be it by pushing, distracting, numbing, fixing, pleasing, withdrawing, whatever. Even if that reaction's not really working well, this remnant of our implicit memory is our old learned ways doing the best they can with what they've got.

To pivot from the psychological momentum of a brain on a mission to protect requires that you pause. And let's be honest, a pause takes effort and a willingness to slow down. And for some people, slowing down and stopping can feel really vulnerable. It might feel like failure. It might feel dangerous, especially if you grew up in an environment where slowing down, changing course, introspection, or expressing emotion was not safe.

So if pivoting is hard, if pausing is difficult, it just means you're human and you have some deeply ingrained protective programming that is online. And especially since I'm traveling and in a new location right now, it is abundantly clear to me, how do I put this? I have ample opportunities to notice my own grouchy reactivity and ride the waves of other people's emotions when things are not going as planned. Ample opportunity. And I know what will help, and it does not come naturally all the time. It takes deliberately intervening, and it takes practice. But with practice, it does become more automatic.

So what helps pivot when it's difficult? First off, just know, it is possible to change lanes mid-ride. And even a tiny, tiny pivot makes a profound difference. The approach I love, I just call the one-degree shift. So here are the three steps for a one-degree shift. First, pause and name what's

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happening. This sounds like, this is stress taking over. This is stress talking. Something feels off. This isn't how I want to be right now.

That's it. Labeling what's happening works because number one, it imposes a pause. And number two, it helps you become a witness of yourself. Pausing and naming is the equivalent of moving your hand away from your face so that it is arm's length away and you can see it better.

So after you pause and name what's going on, you validate with compassion. This sounds like, no wonder this is happening. Of course, I'm feeling this way. It's been a long day. This feels stressful because it is stressful. When you internally validate what's going on for you, you dial up objectivity. You give yourself perspective. You remind yourself that your experience is reasonable, that it makes sense, and this slows that psychological momentum of the default spiraling.

Now, the third step of the one-degree shift is to get business-like with a micro pivot. Start doing this by reorienting yourself and getting really concrete. And there are a variety of things you can do to bring your executive function back online and here are some ideas.

First, you can just check, what time is it? What's going on around me? Where am I located? And what is one small thing I could do in this moment right now? You can externalize what's hard. Write it down. Text a friend. Say out loud what you notice. This gives you some space from what is inside. You can move, stand up, change rooms, stretch, get a sip of water, look out the window, close your eyes for 30 seconds, do four box breaths, do 10 squats, walk around the block. Move your body in some way. Or you can get inquisitive. Ask, what do I need? What could I do to help make this 10% easier? What needs some attention, even if it's later on?

So the steps of a one-degree shift are: pause and name what's happening, validate with compassion, and then get business-like with some sort of concrete micro pivot. And here's the thing. Even when everything feels off, you don't have to overhaul everything. You just need a one-degree shift. And big picture, you don't have to be calm and resourced all the time. You

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just need to notice when you're not and practice pausing and practice doing a one-degree pivot so that you learn over time with repetition that even when it's crazy, it's possible to shift. And little shifts matter. And what this does is this updates your old strategies to the current decade.

So when life gets crazy and when you want to reset but you don't know how, keep in mind, because of implicit memory and the psychological momentum of a brain in survival mode, it makes sense that it is not easy to pivot. But you don't have to wait for the perfect moment to adjust and get back on track. All you need to do is a one-degree micro pivot where you catch yourself in the dumpster fire moments, you label and validate what's happening, you bring in some kindness like you would for a friend who feels like they are in the thick of it, and then you get business-like with a concrete tiny pivot.

It is not about perfection. It's just about being willing to slow down and pay attention, and make yourself make sense. And this gives you the chance to interrupt a cycle and show up differently, not just in theory, but in your real life. And the more you practice this, the easier it gets to pivot, whether you're just ramping up or you're in the middle of life gone sideways. Because you learn that even in your hardest moments, you can figure out a reset. And this helps you feel confident and resourced even when you're frayed and haggard.

So give the one-degree shift to try. Pause, name your pain, validate it with compassion, and pick a micro concrete pivot and see what happens. And remember, you are already more resourceful than you realize. Talk to you next week.

Do you like this way of approaching your patterns? Do you want to learn more? Want to better understand why you do what you do so you can show up more intentionally? If so, join the Habits on Purpose email list. Just go to habitsonpurpose.com and scroll down to find join the email list. And when you do, you'll get information to your inbox about workshops, what I'm up

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to, what I'm learning about, what I'm thinking about, where I'm speaking, where I'm teaching, and opportunities for us to connect.

For women physicians, you can check out Habits on Purpose for Physicians, small group coaching program, and you can get more information at habitsonpurpose.com/hopp. This program is where you can join a community of other women working on unlearning old habits and designing new ones.

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.