

Ep #186 : From Autopilot to Alignment: Why Even Your "Bad" Habits Make Sense



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With Your Host

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Have you ever looked at a habit, like doomscrolling or eating more than you want, or staying in a job that drains you and thought, why am I like this? What is wrong with me? Well, today, I want to offer you a radically different way of looking at things. There's nothing wrong with you. Even your most frustrating, counterproductive patterns make perfect sense. In today's episode, we'll explore how an autopilot life filled with habits that you may not love gets built.

You'll learn why so many people end up living lives designed by other people's dreams and how understanding your habits instead of going out to fix them can help you find your way back to what matters most.

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. Episode 186, From Autopilot to Alignment: Why Even Your "Bad" Habits Make Sense.

Hello, hello, everybody. Often, when I teach a class, one of the things I like to remind folks of is a reminder that I need. I like to bring something in that will anchor the class into either something that's really meaningful in terms of my life as a whole or my client's life as a whole, or something that can help us anchor ourselves in concrete, ordinary, everyday reality.

So, one of the reminders that I find really powerful comes from Bronnie Ware. She spent time with people as they were dying, and she wrote down a list of the most common regrets of the dying. And the number one most common regret on people's deathbeds was this: "I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me."

So take just a minute to soak that in. "I wish I'd had the courage to live a life true to myself, not the life others expected of me." You could probably end the podcast right there and just take some time really letting that sink in and really letting yourself explore perhaps where that might be something that you feel like you might regret later on for yourself.

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So, let's talk about what can lead to this type of a regret. My take is a life that is on autopilot. An autopilot life is when you're doing all the things, and you maybe are checking off all the boxes, but you haven't yet examined, are all the things I'm doing really what matters? Is this what matters to me? Or is it perhaps a flow that I've just fallen into?

When you do pause and assess, and you look at your life and think, is this what really matters most, you can ask, is this way that I'm living in full opposition to what I actually want and what matters most to me? Is it a mix of other people's values and my own? With a mix, maybe there's elements of keeping up with the American dream, for example, or doing what is culturally normal and expected, or prioritizing hand-me-down values from your family, plus your own ideas and your own values. But perhaps the combination is not balanced. And you will feel this type of imbalance with a strain, an ambivalence, a heaviness, or sort of a cloak of stress.

So take a minute just to ponder, do you feel like things in your life are on autopilot right now? Do you feel like perhaps some of the things that you're doing, you might be open to changing? Now, maybe as you hear this, maybe you actually have no clue if what you're doing is because it's what you want and what you value, or it's just what you've been programmed to want and value. So if this is you, this is much more common than you might think.

So let me give you just an example. Say somebody is an attorney, and their whole family does some sort of work in law or mediation. And they've known since they were a teeny tiny little child that they were going to go that route too. So fast forward to their 40s or their 50s, they are a well-established, highly esteemed attorney. And they don't know what's off, but something feels off. Their life on paper makes it look like they have got it made, but they're not feeling as settled or joyful as they thought they would.

Then, they realize they never really questioned going into law. They essentially made some assumptions that led them to this life. And they

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basically were marinated in this idea for decades. It wasn't even on their radar to question it. And once they got there, there are enough things about it that they could enjoy. They could make the best of it. And honestly, they could see how well they had it: good job, good income, all sorts of material trappings, the freedom to take vacations, buy all the food, clothes, fun stuff that they wanted.

But when they were really honest with themselves, they had basically played out the script from someone else's dream. Instead of security, social esteem, and achieving off maybe a jumping off point for a political career, what they actually valued was owning their own time, creativity, connection, freedom.

So what increases the chances of living a life on autopilot and living a life for other's expectations and not being true to you? Well, number one, no one teaches us this. So a certain degree of ignorance keeps us unaware that this phenomenon can even happen. Number two, autopilot life comes from autopilot habits. Autopilot habits are repeated patterns of thinking, repeated patterns of feeling and acting that simply aren't examined and are the things that we do on default. They are default instead of purposeful.

An autopilot life is how you can be living every day without really noticing that you're not living in a way that you want. Metaphorically, you're taking the superhighway instead of the goat path simply because it's well-established, familiar, and it's easier. Now, when I say easier, I don't necessarily mean more in alignment or more pleasant. What I mean by easier is, when you have done something thousands upon thousands of times, there is a natural tendency for repetition.

So how do you make more of your habits purposeful? Well, that's what we're going to talk about today, and it's probably not what you think. When it comes to changing habits, not living a life on default, and being more authentically you, the most powerful idea I have found that can help you reduce the chance of living that autopilot life and having that regret is to remember that everything you do, even the things that you wish you could

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change, every single thing that you do, you do for a good reason. And when you can trace back what you're doing to the root causes, everything makes sense. In the words of David Hoffman, "There's always a reasonable reason for unreasonable behavior."

So what if instead of strong-arming yourself to change habits that you don't like, you sank back into the realization that everything about you makes sense? Now, what does this have to do with making sure that you don't live your life for the expectations of others, and you live true to yourself? Well, often times, when people have a realization that they might not be living in alignment with what they value most, they will look at their life and they will look at their patterns, they will look at their habits, and they will see all the problems. And they will conclude all of these problems need to be fixed yesterday.

And the way they will approach changing patterns is to approach them like they need to eradicate problems. They need to lobotomize issues. They need to be on a search and destroy mission for all of the problems. And this is understandable, right? If we see things we don't like, we might say, you know what, I really need to go in and change this. But oftentimes, we approach change thinking we need to get rid of things, change things, and oftentimes do it in ways that overlook the root causes for why we're doing things in the first place.

So if you want to create change and you want to have less of these automatic autopilot habits, the very best thing you can do is approach all of them with a sense of curiosity and compassion so that you can figure out how come it makes sense that these are the habits you currently have. Because once you understand the root causes and the benefits and the positive intentions that are baked into your current patterns, that's when change is so much easier.

So what if your work wasn't to eradicate bad habits, but to understand them? What shifts when you imagine that you're a curious anthropologist

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and you're exploring your own life and psyche, looking only for the reasonable reasons for seemingly unreasonable behavior?

Let's take the example of the lawyer who realized that lawyering, which I don't think is a word, lawyering wasn't their cup of tea. Maybe they drink a little bit more than they want at the end of the day because when they come home, they want to wind down and they need to take the edge off the stress. They want to connect with their family and be the partner or parent that they want to be, but the residue from all the work of the day is like this shroud. It follows them home, they feel edgy, and if one more person asks them for one more thing, they might just lose it and snap.

So they drink a bit more than they want. They scroll a little bit more than they want. They escape with exercise or shopping for investment properties online. And if they look at their drinking, shopping, and scrolling as intrinsically bad habits to eradicate, they're going to come at their life from a "this is a problem, it must be fixed, there's something wrong with me" energy. And the way we do one thing is often times the way we do most things. So if they look at their job dissatisfaction in the same way, that this is a problem and it must be fixed, when they have no clue how to fix their job and to make it better, ultimately, it would be very easy for them to conclude that there's something wrong with them that needs to be fixed. And this is fuel for self-criticism, self-loathing, and staying stuck.

And think about the last time you felt super stuck. When you feel super stuck, what are you more likely to do? Well, if you don't know what else to do, you might get relief from the very things that you want to stop doing: a bottle of wine, some Instagram, shopping, and going back to the grindstone. If you maybe just can lose yourself in work, maybe you won't think about all these things. And so, this is how a cycle you want to get out of can perpetuate itself if you approach making a change without understanding being the first step.

So let's contrast this. If instead, the approach was, I make so much sense. Even my quote, "bad habits," they make sense. There is a good reason for

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everything I do. Even my career choice, maybe I don't love it right now. You know what, that actually makes sense too. Then the approach is more, hmm, how can I understand the specifics for how this makes sense? And in that, there's curiosity and there's kindness.

And this helps you get to a place where you ultimately go, oh, of course I want to take the edge off when I come home from work. Who wouldn't after you've spent all day long in a job that is kind of sucking the life out of you, that's actually been in service of an expectation for other people? And what you really, really want is creativity and connection and freedom and to own your own time. And what you have is monotony and security and boredom and things that feel the opposite of what you value. Oh my goodness, this makes so much sense. Not only do my habits make so much sense, but my choice to do law, heck, that makes sense too.

Then, the quote, "unreasonable stuff," drinking, staying up late when you say you want to get a good night's sleep and you want to get up early, this stuff makes sense too. The unreasonable hours of scrolling and shopping makes sense. The drive to succeed at a job that maybe you don't love makes sense. You're doing the best you can in the circumstances you've got. And you're doing the best you can with what you know to do. No wonder you're doing these so-called bad habits. This is such a different way to approach your life. And this is what allows you to make a change from an autopilot life with autopilot habits to a more intentional one.

Because when you get that your habit isn't actually about the food or the alcohol or the investment property shopping, but about finding relief, about creating me time, about reconnecting to what matters most, then you're less likely to think that the solution is to do things like remove Instagram from your phone, or deploy a screen time lock, or swear off sugar and throw away the Halloween candy for once and for all, or sign up for Dry January as the answer to what's ailing you. And you're more likely to do something that is just frankly more effective. You're more likely to spend your precious time and energy to work to understand instead of fix.

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And when you work to understand, you'll ask, what do I really want to do with my life? What would create a life where I don't have to escape? Where I don't have to solve for stress in these ways? And what's keeping me from showing up in a life that's true to me? And perhaps, how could I support myself to investigate this?

So if that quote from Bronnie Ware about the most common regret of the dying resonates with you, and you're assessing your life and checking out the places where you might be living for the expectations of others, maybe not in alignment with your authentic self, and you want to make some changes and you're taking stock of the areas you want to make change, the most effective way that you can make change and be more deliberate, intentional, be more purposeful, isn't to go in to fix problems, but it's to go in with the desire to understand things.

Because every single thing you do, even the habits that you don't like, even the patterns that have repeated themselves for years that you are perhaps looking at and thinking, oh no, this is the slippery slope to being on my deathbed and wishing I had the courage to do something differently. Even those habits, they make good sense.

So here's your work. Figure out the reasonable reasons for any of your seemingly unreasonable behavior or life choices and see where that takes you. And if you want to do this work with a little extra support, follow the podcast. This gives you a weekly dose of topics and teachings that are similar to this. And then, if you want a little more support, join the email list. Just go to habitsonpurpose.com and you'll see the little spot where you can click "Join the email list."

And this is where you'll hear things that I don't cover in the podcast, get little extra bits of advice, tips, strategies, and you'll learn about things like workshops, events, places where I'll be speaking, places where I'll be teaching, because working with people live and in person is one of the most fun things ever. And if ever we're going to cross paths, you'll hear about it on the email list.

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So thank you so much for listening. Anybody who is a new listener, and this is your first time listening, thanks for joining. Thanks for spending time, and I will 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 into your inbox about workshops, what I'm up 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, a 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.