

Ep #189 : Finding Clarity: Two Techniques for Tackling Persistent Problems



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Have you ever had a problem that feels like it just won't quit? It might be huge and overwhelming or tiny, but endlessly nagging. Maybe it's this Groundhog Day theme you've tried to solve a dozen different ways only to find yourself stuck in the same spot again and again.

Well, today, I'm going to teach you two practical techniques for cutting straight to the heart of these persistent problems. One focuses on naming and clarifying pain points, and the other is all about identifying and honoring your deepest desires. And together, they'll help you turn even the most stubborn challenges into manageable next steps.

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 everyone. Welcome to this episode. I'm actually really excited and have such a sense of purpose and clarity, and focus at this moment that I'm recording this episode. And part of that is because, as I was coming up with this episode, I realized this is so important to me, this topic, because it's something that I've grappled with and wrestled with in my own life. And it's such a tangible thing that has helped me in so many ways. So, I hope that what we talk about today helps you in the way that it helps me.

So today, I'm bringing you a really tangible, two-sided coin approach to help you cut to the heart of almost any recurrent problem that you have. So I want you to bring to mind something that feels heavy or persistent or something that's just in the back of your mind as this unsolvable riddle. Maybe it's something that feels too big, or maybe just so minuscule that it's petty, but it nags you like a little mosquito. It could be that Groundhog Day theme that comes up and up and up over and over and over. And no matter what you do, you can't seem to get traction on it. If you can relate, this episode is for you.

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So what we're going to do is we're going to talk about a rubric, a framework that you can use to solve any problem. Now, this approach has two paths. You can take one path and leave the other one. You can take both paths. You could do one and then the other one in either sequence. But I want you to listen to both and see how you might personalize them for yourself.

So here's the first step. Take that problem you'd like to solve and name it by putting into words the difficulty. What specifically is painful about your dilemma? Get honest. What do you really hate? What feels miserable? What's hard? What are you worried might happen? Let all the nitty gritty details, the grievances, the things that you loathe, the things that seem petty and silly, the things that you fear, all the potential disasters and imagined catastrophes you have in your head that you're dreading, the aspects that feel unsolvable, take all the things that you're afraid to say and bring them on purpose into the light of day by naming them.

Now, I know this sounds super cheery, right? Bring to mind all the difficulty. But let me explain why this is so powerful. When we have stress and difficulty, but we don't give ourselves permission to address it, it lurks under the surface. It behaves like a bubbling liquid covered only by Saran Wrap. As it gets hotter and hotter, it has nowhere to go. When all of our discomfort does not have a venue or a forum or a channel to express itself, it will just push and push and push against that thin layer that's over it, that thin Saran Wrap, so to speak. And it will just bubble out at inopportune times. And at the same time, it can seem like there's no end, there's no bottom. There's too much to handle with this problem.

So, what do we do? Well, to survive and cope, we chronically dismiss it. We ignore it, we invalidate the difficult things. And this ends up just perpetuating the very problem. You know that saying, "What you resist persists?" Well, that's exactly what's going on here. And the irony, when we don't address something because it seems too big or too bad, is that very thing becomes bigger and worse than it otherwise would be if we would take time and get really honest and address it.

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So how do you take something that you fear might be unmanageable and make it manageable? Well, you give that thing an appropriate container. Now, what do I mean by a container? Well, the container you give the difficulty of a problem is simply the intentional space where you ask, what is the problem? What's painful? What's hard? And you give yourself the permission to look at all of it.

So the container you're creating for yourself is the permission to look at all the hard things. And to look at them on purpose at a specific time in a specific way, whether you write it out or talk it out through a voice memo, or think about it when you go on a walk. It doesn't really matter how you do it. The point is you give yourself the opportunity to look head-on at what about this problem is actually so painful. What's hard? What am I afraid to name?

And this is how you take a pain point in your life that's perhaps intimidatingly immense and realize that it's acting like a pufferfish. It's acting big, but it's only doing that because you aren't addressing it. And just like a kid who wants to tell their parents something and the parents are brushing them off or they're too busy because they're on the phone, and the kid gets louder and louder and louder, so do our pain points when we don't turn and address them.

So the first part of coming up with a solution to a problem is to give the pain points of your problem words. When you give words to the difficulty, the difficulty doesn't ferment in the back of your psyche and then surface on your deathbed. So what does this actually look like? This looks like something that you can either do written, while you're walking, or talking into a voice memo. You can also do it with a partner if you prefer that.

You come up with what is the problem you would like to get clarity on, what's the problem you would like to solve, what's the problem you'd like to move forward on? And you put to words what is specifically difficult, and you let yourself name every single facet that is difficult, that is hard, that is scary, that is worrisome. And you just get it all out on paper, out loud, wherever.

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Now, side note here, is this counterintuitive approach easy? Well, sometimes it is totally easy. You turn and look at your pain and you realize it's this diminutive, very manageable, tiny little minnow that just had a big shadow. It was a pufferfish that, when deflated, it was actually quite small. And other times it's not so easy because it really does seem like if we crack the lid, it's going to be Pandora's box. We'll be consumed with thoughts and feelings that might make us nonfunctional, or what we discover will be too painful to handle. It will be worse than just chronically ignoring it. And maybe it'll be harmful to the people we love.

But here's what you must remember. You can handle more than you give yourself credit for. Truly, you can handle more than you give yourself credit for. Anytime you believe otherwise, it's usually a lie. You are resourceful, and you can face things even when you worry that you cannot. And this brings me to one of the really important parts of this investigative process. And this is to inquire of yourself, what are your concerns about addressing these pain points? Because when you know your concerns, that can inform how you support yourself as you do this part of the exercise.

You might need to create conditions that are conducive to feeling resourceful. This might mean you reach out to a friend who's your biggest fan and you ask them for support or company or normalization or validation. You might need to titrate this process, ten minutes at a time, one week at a time. Whatever you do, when you look at what your concerns are, that's how you can create as much safety, as much resourcefulness around this container of examining the pain points. And at the end of the day, your purpose is simply to bring to light the specific difficulties. The reason to look at the difficulties is to get clarity and specificity.

And here's what's possible when you do this. Sometimes what you bring into the light ends up being very straightforward, and you're going to know exactly what to do about it. Other times, you're not instantly going to know what to do, but what you discover is going to inform your next steps in ways that would be impossible without that data.

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So, let me give you an example. Say you are miserable in your job, but it seems overwhelming or too risky to really spend time looking at why. But then, when you write down all the things that are painful and difficult, when you say what you're afraid to say, you discover that at the core of your misery is that you don't feel like you have control of your schedule, and you feel like you're the only one that feels that way. You feel isolated, like you don't belong, and you want more autonomy. You want more connection and community.

Now, you've gone from hating everything about your job to having pretty much two very specific problems: no community and less agency than you want. And now that you've clarified this, you can step back with some perspective. It may become abundantly clear that you need to just quit your job. But now, quitting is for reasons that really resonate, for reasons that you like. You've hit up against a non-negotiable in terms of a core value.

Or conversely, it may become abundantly clear that you simply need to do whatever it takes to set some boundaries around your schedule, even if that means you're the first person in your group to articulate this need. And when you think about that, you might realize that the hardest part of this response is imagining the reaction of one particular coworker. And now, you've further refined your specific pain point and your specific work to address, which relates to a coworker's reaction as opposed to a toxic work environment in general. And this is how you go from feeling miserable, out of control, reactive, completely overwhelmed, to getting clarity around specificity with what the actual problem is, so you can have specificity with your solution and your next steps.

Now let's move to the other part of this technique. Now, this other part is one that you can do completely independent of the first pain point exercise, or you can do it in conjunction.

The other path that can take you to a similar space of clarity is to ask, what do I crave? What actually matters that I'm not getting enough of? And you're asking these questions in the context of the specific problem you're

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grappling with. Then you ask yourself, what might it look like if you had the very thing you crave? If you did the activities you wanted and felt the feelings you wanted. And when you do this, you do not consider the details of the logistics or the how. You are just putting to words what you crave, what actually matters that you're not getting enough of, and what it might look like if you had the things you craved. If you were doing more of what you aren't getting enough of, and if you felt the feelings you wanted.

Now, quick side note here, this technique is not about scrubbing clean your human experience or creating some escapist Shangri-La. This is simply an exercise where you give yourself permission to ask what you really want and then make yourself spend a little time with that instead of scurrying off and ignoring some of these deep desires that are connected to your core values.

So let me walk you through how you can actually answer the question related to what you crave and what you're not getting enough of. I like to do this on paper, and I'm going to give you numbered questions. And the first one is to ask, what makes you come alive? Number two, what do you crave? What do you want more of? Number three, what actually matters to you? And number four, what are you afraid to name that actually deeply matters? So, what makes you come alive? What do you crave and want more of? What actually matters to you? And then, the way to get a little bit deeper is to ask, what are you afraid to name that actually deeply matters?

Once you have an answer to those, then you ask, what is in between you and what you need and crave and want? And when you ask this second part, you're going to notice one of two things. Either this is where the first technique of naming the pain points will come in, because what's between you and your desires might be unnamed pain points that just need a container. Or the other thing that can happen is you'll find very clear obstacles, and you can rattle these off in like five minutes.

So say you deeply desire the sense of freedom and adventure that you used to have when you traveled internationally when you were young,

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before you were married, before you had this location-dependent job, and before you had a bunch of kids.

So you ask, what's in the way of that sense of freedom? Maybe you discover that it's fear of rejection or potential shutdown that you predict will happen if you tell your partner because you know they have a tendency to personalize and self indict and then withdraw when you share about a big dream that seems out of reach because they haven't thought to articulate this and they take your desire for international travel and freedom to mean that they're not giving you something you need and you don't like them. And you don't want to deal with that, so you don't even pursue looking at this desire.

Or it's your kids. They're too young for you to just leave them behind while you go traipsing around the globe. And they've got good friends and they're involved in sports and activities, and a school that you like, and you just don't want to infringe on their freedom. It's something you don't want to disrupt. Or maybe you discover that it's money and time. Sure, you would go travel if you could, but then you'd take time off from work, and then you wouldn't have enough money to pay your bills.

So once you have the answer to what's in the way, don't stop. It's tempting to say, "I want these things, but these blocks are in the way, and so there's nothing I can do." And if you do this, this is a bit of all or none sneaking in that rains on your parade and will block you from getting any clarity. So, just notice all or none thinking could crop up and block you from further exploration by trying to shield you from disappointment and shutting you down from any creative solutions.

So your next step is to ask, given my desire plus my obstacle, what are a few workable, realistic solutions that I could experiment with? No solution has to solve everything. They just need to be ideas worth experimenting with.

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Sometimes it can help you get going if you just write down all the ideas that come to mind and promise yourself that when you review them and you find out that all of them seem really dumb, you will have at least eliminated those ideas, so you can move on to the next batch. As you do this work, watch out for the second reaction of all or none thinking, which is to ask yourself the question, what are a few workable solutions? And find out that you've gone blank. You don't know. You tell yourself, "I have no ideas." You're completely confused.

When this happens, trust me, I've been there, done that. It is very normal and it's really persuasive. But you need to push yourself just a little bit. So if you get to a blank, ask yourself, if I did know, if I were giving someone else advice, if my assignment was to list five stupid ideas, what would I write? 20 years ago, what might I have done?

Or if you have kids in your life, whether they are your kids or somebody else's kids, you can go tap into their brilliant brains. Kids are great about giving us ideas that are outside the typical confines of the adult brain. And you could even alter your questions so that maybe you're not revealing any sort of intimate pain points or deep desires, you're not ready to say out loud. And you can say something like, "Hey kid, I want to have more fun, but it seems like that's impossible. What are some ideas you would recommend?"

So no matter how you go about getting some potential solutions, once you have them written down, pick one. Then do a quick gut check, a reality check. Is it doable? Is it realistic? Does it fit your life? And you want it to be microscopically small so that it does not take up all your time to figure out how to implement it. And then you go do it.

So let me give you an example and we'll use the one of travel and desiring freedom and adventure when you have bills and kids, et cetera. On your list, you might decide you're going to plan a trip two years in the future and between now and then, you're going to figure out childcare and you're going to learn how to leverage credit card points and you're going to put

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your head together with either a tour group or a friend or your travel loving partner, or you're going to make the best solo itinerary you can come up with. Or maybe you realize that you feel free and adventurous when you paint or hike or sing.

So you decide you're going to figure a way that you can do more of that for a couple of hours this week. It's these types of really concrete, tangible steps towards something that deeply matters to you that will add up over time and move you forward to a solution to a problem that can seem unsolvable.

So let's recap. The two techniques to addressing a big problem are, number one, name the pain points. Put to words exactly what feels hard, scary, miserable, and give that discomfort a container so it doesn't fester. Number two, name the desires. Ask, what do I crave? What do I want more of? What makes me feel alive? And then explore what's in the way and brainstorm small experiments to move you towards it.

Both of these techniques shine a light on what is hidden. One brings the difficulties out of the shadows, and the other brings values and longings into focus. And together, they generate clarity. And clarity is what makes solutions and creativity possible.

So what's really going on here? What are the mechanics and the workings behind the scene when you do this type of exercise? Well, when you look eyes wide open at pain points and desires and you come up with possible ways to address them, you are reinforcing your own resourcefulness. You are proving that you can name anything because you're built to handle anything that you find in the so-called junk drawer of your psyche.

The act of examining what's hard and naming what you desire comes from the sentiment that you matter. So instead of the sentiment, "It's not a big deal. Really, it's nothing," when it comes to a problem that you're grappling with, which are classic phrases for invalidating something in order to avoid it.

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Or instead of saying, "Sure, in the ideal world I might do X, Y, Z," or, "Come on, I'm doing pretty good," which can be code for, "I can't actually say out loud what I really want because that would be silly or it would be judged or I would look ungrateful or selfish or petty or I'd be more disappointed when it didn't happen," instead, the meta message that you are growing into and embodying when you do this work is, "My pain points matter. The parts of me that are screaming for attention, they matter. They deserve to speak my desires, my values. They matter a lot." The act of exploring them is a way to say, "I matter enough to do something about what matters to me."

So let's just bring this all together with an example that is so common, and this has to do with leaving work at work and having specifically finishing paperwork or finishing charts at the end of your day. So, with technique number one, this is what you might find. The problem isn't just my unfinished notes. It's that I dread criticism if I get behind. I'm going to feel guilty about not being home at a certain point. I'm going to feel tense and disconnected when I rush home physically, but my mind is still at work. Naming these pain points clarifies what's really uncomfortable: fear of judgment, guilt, disconnection.

Now we bring in technique number two, where you name the desires. With this problem of finishing paperwork, you ask, what do I crave? And you notice your answer might be something like, I just want to feel present when I'm home. I want to be done efficiently so I can connect and enjoy my evenings. And with clarity, you can brainstorm some experiments. Maybe you set a timer for your notes. Maybe you try a new ritual for leaving the office. Maybe you tackle a chunk of notes earlier in the day so you can catch up and actually feel more free. Now, neither technique erases the workload, but both help you move from vague frustration to clarity and manageable next steps.

So remember, persistent problems, they're never proof that you're broken. They're not persisting because you're incapable of solving them. Their persistence is just your invitation to look more closely. And ways that you can make this really tangible are to look either at the pain points that you

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may have been avoiding or the desires you may have been neglecting. And when you name what's hard and you name what you crave, you remind yourself, "My struggles matter. My values matter." And from there, you can experiment with real, doable steps towards change.

Thank you so much for listening today. If this episode resonated with you, please share a review, give me a rating, share it with a friend. It will help others find the podcast and get the value that I hope that you all get. And if you want to take this work deeper and you want to learn more, join the email list where I will send you regular emails about where I'm speaking, events I'm offering, and you can check out Habits on Purpose for Physicians small group coaching or private coaching. And you can find all the details at habitsonpurpose.com.

Until next time, remember you are resourceful beyond your expectations. Let me say that again. Until next time, you are more resourceful than you realize, and I will talk to you next week.

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.