

Ep #190: Why Deliberate Habits Are Key to Living an Intentional Life



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With Your Host

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Today, I'm going to talk about why habits are so vitally important. And why, if you want to be intentional about your life, you must be deliberate with your habits.

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. So, the other night, my husband and I were talking at the dinner table, and he mentioned the idea that most people don't really like to say that they're middle-aged until you get to a certain age. We might say that we're middle-aged when we're 50 or 55. But we don't usually say that we're middle-aged when we're 20, or 30, or 40 years old.

However, depending on where you get your statistics, the actual median age of death, at least in the United States, is somewhere between the ages of 74 and 80. And if you want another grim statistic, 65-year-olds have about a 50/50 chance of living into their 80s or 90s. Which means that we're middle-aged right around the time that we're 38 to 40 years old.

Which begs the question, how much longer do you have? How much longer do you have with your current quality of life? And given the unknown but finite reality, are you spending your time the way you want to? Now, regardless of whether you are spending your time the way you want to, or you are not spending your time the way you want to, let's think about what it is that actually creates the experience that you're currently living.

It should come as no surprise that my position is that it is all your habits. Your habits shape every aspect of your experience, of your entire life. Your habits are the repetitive ways that you think and feel, and act; your habits are responsible. Your habits shape your experience of your entire life. Tally up your habits, and you have the results that you are living day in and day out.

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So, if you feel stuck, or reactionary, or like your life is a little bit out of control, look at what habits you have that are creating this experience for you. If solemn and as dark as this, “You’re gonna die sooner than you might think,” type of a message might sound, in addition to a little bit of a kick in the pants, I’m actually here to plant a big seed of optimism.

As deeply entrenched as your habits may seem, I assure you, they are so much more malleable than you realize. And when you change your habits to intentional habits, you will stop feeling like someone else is at the wheel of your life.

So, as many of my longtime listeners have heard me say ad nauseam, when I say habits, I don’t just mean the things like, pressing snooze or eating vegetables, or not doing as much yoga as you want. Included with these kinds of things are more stealthy habits that you might not even consider habits.

And it is these stealthy things that actually impact, color, and shape your day-to-day experience. So, let me give you some examples. Say your habit is to reflexively second-guess everything. And perhaps, this habit started out as a way to double-check yourself. It helped make sure that you didn’t miss anything. It helped you keep people safe. It helps you be very detail-oriented and thorough.

But now, you wake up in the middle of the night, wondering, did I make the right decision with that patient? Did I say the right thing at that meeting? Maybe I should have done something else. Maybe I should have said something differently? What if that was the wrong move?

The habit of second-guessing doesn’t just happen after the fact. Second-guessing can plague you before, during, and after interactions. And in this way, it only serves to bog you down. I mean, think about it. It’s impossible to take action as swiftly as you could, if you weren’t playing out 50 different hypotheticals or beating yourself up for the choices that you’ve already made.

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Or, maybe you have a habit of catastrophic thinking. But when catastrophizing spills out into your personal life... Say your friend doesn't reply to your text. You might ruminate, imagine that they hate you, and that you're going to die alone with no friends. You might wonder, what you did to piss them off so badly that they take more than an hour or two to reply.

Or, maybe your kid is really whiny when you ask them to stop playing so you can get out the door to go to school. And in that moment, you flash forward to this image of them as the spoiled brat, 20 years from now, who is struggling to hold down a job.

Or, maybe there's something much more significantly jarring, like an unexpected diagnosis or unexpected news from someone. Before you even know all the facts, you might time-travel to this dismal future where every possible unsavory outcome has already come to be. Can you see how this habit of catastrophic thinking has a real impact on your experience of the here-now?

Let's take one more example. Say that you habitually take things personally, and on top of that, you feel like an imposter. Now, this is a really common dynamic duo; two habits that I think of like sidekicks. Not only does it feel kind of yucky to take things personally, but right on its heels, you feel like an imposter. These two habits are ready to make you feel terrible and small.

So, the way this might look is at work, there's a policy change that's announced. And you just know that this policy change has solely been created because you must have messed up royally. Or, let's just say, your partner is having a really hard day, and maybe they voice a complaint about something that they have to go do. And instantly, you assume it's because of something that you must have done. That is all your fault.

And to make matters worse, one day, people are going to figure out that you're just not cut out for your job. Or, say somebody comments in an online review about how they had to wait for a really long time for their appointment with you, and you make that mean that you're not competent.

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These kinds of habits, these stealthy, hidden habits, are the ones that can set a miserable tone for your life. Imagine the 10-year impact of your current hidden, stealthy habits, not changing.

Now, these are just some of the habits that I coach my clients on privately, and I coach my clients on in my group programs. They're habits that can seem baked into your very identity. But the amazing thing is this; thanks to how creative and resourceful humans are, and thanks to neuroplasticity, old habits can be unraveled, and new habits rewired.

Quick sidenote on neuroplasticity. Neuroplasticity is basically an umbrella term that refers to the capacity of our neurons to change their connections, change their behavior, form new connections, in response to new information and learning. It's the capacity of these neurons to essentially change how they are wired, and to adapt based on experiences that we have.

So, I want you to take a minute and imagine changing habits, like beating yourself up, procrastinating, overcomplicating things, people pleasing. Imagine changing the habit of struggling to say a clean no. Or, changing the habit of struggling to set boundaries. Imagine changing compulsively checking emails, compulsive scrolling, when you would rather be present with your people.

Imagine changing emotional eating, emotional drinking, to soothe this anxious, frenetic pace of your life. Or, stopping the habit of overextending, or no longer underestimating how long something takes. Imagine no longer discounting your achievements with things like, "Oh, it wasn't that big of a deal. Anybody could do it; it was a fluke."

Imagine changing the habit of chronically deferring to others and being self-effacing with, "Oh, I don't mind. No, you choose; I don't really have a preference. Whatever you want to do is totally fine." Imagine changing the habit of chronically assuming that others know more than you, or changing that tendency to minimize stressors. You know how that sounds, "It's just

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not so bad. It's truly fine. It could be worse." Imagine you stop struggling to create whitespace that you don't instantly fill with busyness.

So, my question for you is, what habits do you currently have that you would love to change? Take a minute and bring them to mind. Now, once you have them in mind, I want you to take a minute to imagine how great it would be to leave them behind.

When you change these kinds of mindset and emotional habits, you will unburden yourself from so much mental heaviness. Think about what might be available when you leave these behind. When you quit second-guessing, you're going to make decisions more easily. When you stop beating yourself up for every damn thing, you will use your time so much more efficiently.

You will free up so much whitespace when you're not ruminating, catastrophizing, and taking things so personally. When boundaries are clear, you don't worry what others might think or feel, and you free up time and energy to do what you really love to do. The end of people pleasing means the end of resent for agreeing to do the things that deep down you don't want to do.

When you completely trust yourself, you stop second-guessing and stop looking to others for answers. When you don't have to perpetually improve, you accept yourself just as you are today. When perfection is no longer the metric for success, you're willing to imperfectly figure things out.

Failing becomes an integral part of learning, not a sign of your ineptitude. And when this happens, you're willing to go for much bolder goals. Instead of self-flagellation from your inner critic, you know how to flow self-compassion, without devolving into self-pity or arrogance.

Think about the 10-year impact of having new habits that you love; at home, at work, and your relationships, with how you treat yourself. It looks like self-trust, the end of analysis-paralysis, non-negotiable self-care, being

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unafraid of failing, and unafraid to go for bold goals. It's more clarity, joy, ease, presence.

So, because we have such a finite time that we are alive, and likely an even shorter amount of time of quality health years, why spend it feeling like your habits are in control of you? And feeling reactionary and batted around, instead of feeling like you're in the driver's seat with a sense of agency?

Personally, I see no reason not to prioritize being really deliberate with your habits. So, how can you be more deliberate? Here's the way that I teach it. All change hinges on awareness and understanding. And then, integrating what you'll learn into realistic, tiny action that you do regularly.

When you become aware of and identify habituated thinking that doesn't serve you, thinking that at home and at work, you can then start to explore how your current thinking, how your current emotional responses, how your current habits developed. And spoiler alert, most habits develop as a resourceful response to a set of circumstances.

When you go on to understand the root causes for your habits, then it's time to pair this understanding with implementing practical concepts and tools into your everyday life; tools and ideas that you don't use are completely useless. So, this combination of awareness and understanding, plus pragmatic tools that you integrate, in real time, facilitate the sense of, 'I can handle anything that comes my way.'

And, this is how sustainable habit change and true self-confidence is created. So, I want you to take a minute and think about 10 years from now. And if you have a tendency for catastrophic thinking, just keep that in mind as you are flashing forward to 10 years from now. Imagine the habits that you have today are even more deeply ingrained. Perhaps nothing's necessarily worse, but nothing is different.

Now, I want you to contrast this to a reality 10 years from now, where your habits are entirely different. And, you no longer stress over the same things

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you stress over today. Your emotions are not things you have to wrestle with or tame. You don't squash your feelings down. And you have the confidence to process them, and learn from your emotions.

You can say no with the same ease of saying yes. Doing things just for yourself doesn't lead to a spiral of guilt. You regularly feel agency, and you know how to cultivate self-trust. You're as compassionate to yourself as you are with others. You've totally quit beating yourself up. You know how to handle challenges without mind drama.

You now set enormous goals just for fun, and you go for them without tying your self-worth to how you perform, or being mean to yourself along the way. Your habit of being curious with yourself leads you to self-compassion and self-confidence. And your norm is to slow down so you can be aware of your thoughts and feelings in the moment. You live what feels like a solidly deliberate life.

Now, as you have that in mind, these two different realities: one, 10 years from now, where your habits are even more deeply entrenched. Either nothing has gotten worse, and it's just stayed the same, or perhaps, things have gotten a little bit worse. And you compare this to the 10 years from now version of reality, where your habits have been completely rewired. Which one do you want to choose?

So, the questions I invite you to ponder as you go through this week, and you think about the median age of death, and you consider how close you might be to middle age, is what stealthy habits do you have that you want to change? What will life be like if these habits stay the same? And, what will it be like when you change them, the way you would like to change them? And that's what I have for you this 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.