

Ep #194: Why Grand Plans Fail and a Better Way to Reach Your Goals



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With Your Host

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Today's episode is about the habit of making grandiose plans that you can't follow or maintain. Listen and learn why we do this and what to do instead. I'll teach you the alternative that can literally change everything about how you approach your goals.

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. If you are new to the podcast, thank you for listening, and welcome. Lately, life has been full of kids who are back at school, sports are going on, activities.

What I've noticed lately is a bit of overwhelm and some list-making, which is one of the things that I do from the emotion of overwhelm. I will make lists. I will make lists for the week, lists for the day, to-do lists, reminder lists, things that I won't forget; all consolidated or all separate.

Noticing this, I've had to actively address it, which, for me, takes a variety of forms. The first thing I do is I use "3 N's" that I teach; notice, name, and normalize. Then, for overwhelm, one of my usual tendencies is to think that what I really need is a grand plan for how I'm going to address things and how I'll prevent overwhelm in the future.

So, what I do, is I make this grandiose plan that ultimately results in little to no real change. What I've learned, the long, slow way, is that grand plans are the most ineffective way to accomplish anything. Here's how it goes: You have a goal to change something; to create a new habit, to get fitter, to eat better, to change something in your marriage.

Or you have a project in mind, a dream that you want to make real. Maybe you have a vision for your life that's really different than how things are now; you want a different job, a new role at work, or maybe you want a

Ep #194: Why Grand Plans Fail and a Better Way to Reach Your Goals

whole new identity. You have a goal and you want something, then you make a plan to do all the things to make it happen.

But when it comes time to follow through on that plan, it goes okay for a day or two, or maybe even a week or two, but then it's like the universe puts the brakes on, and insidiously or abruptly you stop doing anything, and a month later, nothing's really changed.

Let's use a specific made-up example, so that you can see the typical trajectory for a grandiose plan. This is going to be about a physical goal. But I think as you listen, you're going to be able to see how it can be extrapolated to nonphysical goals.

So, say you want to run a 10k at a certain pace. You sketch out a running schedule for the next twelve weeks. You're going to run five days a week, 45 minutes each run. You're going to make sure that you hydrate better. You're going to join the local gym so you can do more strength training. And, you're going to start eating better.

As you make this plan, you imagine the future reality where you're running most every day, you're enjoying yourself, the gym feels really fun, you drink water automatically, your fitness is improving, you're really close to your pace goal, and all of your meals, they are delicious and nutritious.

You can see it. You can almost feel exactly how great it feels when everything is going great. And the plan you make, when you look at it, it looks totally reasonable. But in reality, it's overly ambitious. It's too much. It's too soon, and requires pretty massive changes from what you're currently doing today.

And because it's so grandiose, you start out enthused. But after a few days, you're forgetting to hydrate, it's a hassle to prep all of your food, you've only run two days instead of five. And you didn't have a plan B for rainy weather or work getting busy, and your gym being closed by the time you could go.

Ep #194: Why Grand Plans Fail and a Better Way to Reach Your Goals

So, when you ran into these obstacles, you just didn't do anything. Then you think, "Well, this is never going to work." Maybe you beat yourself up for not following through, and think, "Well, why bother? Why even go do anything?" So, what happens? You quit everything; you stop doing any action. After, say, three weeks, this grand, beautiful plan has fizzled into a pile of nothing.

This is because the plan that seemed reasonable was, in actuality, too much, too quickly. Calling on too large of a shift without a plan B. For the most part, grand plans that don't take into consideration the reality of our current life and our current situation, subsequently, don't end up anywhere good.

So, why on earth do we make grand plans that are unrealistic, if this is where they're going to end up? There are three main reasons. As I go over these reasons, think about if you notice these particular reasons for yourself, whether you notice one or all three.

The reasons are this: Number one, perfectionism and all-or-none thinking. Number two, the belief that starting small says something negative of value. And number three, impatience and the arrival fallacy. Let's take these one at a time.

So, number one, perfectionism and all-or-none thinking. A perfectionistic mindset, or way of thinking, is one where you believe it's always better to be better. That flawless, ideal, and perfect are the only acceptable outcomes. And you believe that when things are perfect, you'll feel okay.

All-or-none thinking is characterized by seeing things as all good or all bad. I'm either all in or I'm out. I should go big or go home. I do it right, or I don't do it at all. When these two things get together, there is no room for a gradual approach or middle ground. So, there's the perfect idealized plan, or there's nothing.

Ep #194: Why Grand Plans Fail and a Better Way to Reach Your Goals

When we do this, it makes it so easy to make a plan that's hard, if not impossible to follow, without any flexibility to modify or adjust that plan when things don't go exactly right.

Number two, we think starting small or starting imperfectly, or starting with something that's not very ambitious, says something negative about us. Who are we if we have to start small? Only losers start small. Only people who aren't really committed start small. Starting small is a sign of not being as far along as you should be. It's pitiful. It's embarrassing. It's kind of lame. It's silly.

When starting small with an unexciting plan means something negative about who you are, of course, you're going to be drawn towards a bigger, bolder plan.

So, number three is impatience and the arrival fallacy. We are impatient for the goal to be here immediately. We think that if we do more, and we do everything perfectly, all at once, we will get there faster. And we really, really, really want the goal because we believe once we have it, life's going to feel better. We'll feel how we want to feel. We'll feel calm and confident, and settled.

The arrival fallacy is the idea that once we meet a goal, once we meet a milestone, or complete a task, everything will feel amazing. We will have arrived. It's a fallacy because we assume that the completed project, or the new level of fitness, will somehow magically solve all of our other problems and will usher in some utopian existence.

But the reality is, that when we get "there," in air quotes, we are still experiencing the world as us, with our same brain or same patterns of thinking, our same habits. There's just a different set of circumstances or a different scenery around us. This is the proverbial 'the grass is always greener on the other side.'

Ep #194: Why Grand Plans Fail and a Better Way to Reach Your Goals

So, in our impatience, we make an unrealistic plan. We might think about what we did five years ago to get to a similar goal, so we replicate that plan. Even though five years ago, for the running example, we were running 30 miles a week.

All of these things combined; perfectionism, all-or-none thinking, impatience, believing that the future will be so much better than now, paired with the idea that smaller, more tedious steps mean something negative about us and our capacity, of course, we make unrealistic plans; to do too much, too quickly. And we can't actually follow through or maintain the plans for the long haul.

What's the answer? First, you need to be aware of the tendency to make big plans that fizzle. This awareness alone helps you recognize it and stop doing it. When you're aware you have this tendency, then you can start noticing when you're dabbling in fantasy of the perfect future. You can catch yourself making a reasonable-sounding, but in reality, unrealistic plan.

Then the next step, the solution, is actually very, very simple. After you're clear on your goal, pick something so small that it's a no-brainer, that you can follow through on, and then go do it. Once that tiny action is so easy to do, it is routine. Then, you add more.

Let me explain by going back to that running example. The overly ambitious plan that you can't sustain, to run 45 minutes a day, five days a week, eat better, hydrate better, and go to the gym. When you stop doing that after two runs, it results in running a whopping one and a half hours over the next six weeks.

Versus, you decide on a single microscopic action to do. You will run 10 minutes a day, three days a week, until that's routine. You ditch focusing on nutrition and the gym. So, let's say you run 10 minutes a day, three days a week, for two weeks, and then it becomes pretty automatic. You then decide to increase it to 20 minutes a day, three times a week.

Ep #194: Why Grand Plans Fail and a Better Way to Reach Your Goals

After a couple weeks, that's easy, so you increase it to 30 minutes, three times a week. And if I've got my math correct, at the end of six weeks you've ran for about six hours. Compared to an hour and a half when you had the bigger plan.

When you spread this particular approach out over the course of six months or a year, you can see how you will accomplish more with a 'start excessively small and doable plan' than you ever will with a grand plan that's filled with starts and stops.

Now, I know somebody out there is listening and thinking, "Well, you know what, I had this huge a-ha, and my entire life changed. After that, I took a lot of bold, massive action. From that day forward, I changed everything. And, I'm a new person today because of that."

This approach is completely possible. The thing is, for everyday goals, it's not typical. It's usually not something that we can rely on, predict happening, or replicate. What is replicable is usually quite boring. So, let's take a few non-exercise-based activities as examples.

Say you want to start doing stand-up comedy, or something in the world of performing arts. It's a hobby that you miss, that you wish you did more, and you want that to be part of your life. So, instead of planning to take two classes at the community college, doing every open call comedy event, doing every local play, traveling out of your city to go get involved in a different theater.

What is one thing, if you did it regularly today, that will pay off dividends over the course of two years? It might be that you study your favorite comedians once a week. It might be that you join a single local improv class at the community college. It might mean you commit to an open mic night once a month.

Ep #194: Why Grand Plans Fail and a Better Way to Reach Your Goals

Or let's say you want to write a book. Instead of planning to write two hours every morning, every day, you commit to writing one article a week, for a year. You commit to writing 15 minutes a day, twice a week.

Or say you want to be more present with your kids and yell less. Instead of making a plan to meditate every morning, involve your kids in this romanticized version of meal prep every night, and have a weekly game night, you commit to being fully present five minutes a day. Or you commit to finding one silly, fun thing to do at bedtime.

Instead of, what's the perfect plan to get me to my goal? The question becomes, what's the smallest possible thing that I can realistically do regularly, that almost seems too easy to do, and I can start right now? When you choose, you want to make this something that is a no-brainer. You want to make it literally something that there's absolutely no reason why you can't follow through on it, more days than not.

The reason picking something so small is so useful is that when it's a no-brainer for you to do it, you're going to do it regularly. When you regularly do it, you're going to develop a pattern of doing what you say you're going to do. When you do what you say you're going to do, you establish trust.

Now, this behavior-oriented advice may sound like heresy coming from someone who talks about the power of your mindset and the power of your beliefs when it comes to your habituated behaviors. But it's not actually in opposition to this idea. It doesn't oppose the idea that our beliefs shape our experience, that our thoughts drive our feelings, that drive our actions.

There's a magic to starting with your action, especially a very small one, and I'm going to explain it to you. Consider this: what do you think that you need to be thinking, to fix something small and follow through on it? You probably need to be thinking something like, "That would be easy. I can do this, no problem. I've got this, this is doable."

Ep #194: Why Grand Plans Fail and a Better Way to Reach Your Goals

These particular thoughts will probably create an emotional state where you feel matter-of-fact, focused, ease, determined, and encouraged. They'll probably create an emotional state that is unpressured. These thoughts will likely not create an emotional state where you feel desperation or anxiety or overwhelm or pressure or stress or tension.

You can see how this more matter-of-fact, unpressured emotional state, repeated regularly, can drive forward progress. So, when you commit to doing something small, you're committing to an action. Which, what you're also doing, is committing to cementing a way of thinking and feeling in relation to your goals.

So, on the outside, someone sees you running 10 minutes, three times per week. But internally, inside your mind, you're regularly thinking something like, "I've got this, this is doable. I can do this." And when you regularly think that it's like you create an experience where you feel matter-of-fact, where you feel focused, where you feel ease, where you feel encouraged.

And what that does, is creates an experience where you believe you're capable, you believe you've got this, you believe you're able to pick a task and do it and follow through. These repetitive thoughts are like a thread in a loom that make up a fabric of self-trust and self-confidence. And this forms a foundation of motivation and optimism, and encouragement, which gives you momentum.

So, if grand plans are your go-to, there's a good reason you do this. For most of us, it's actually not the most effective way to reach a goal. If you want to create a different experience, you have to do something differently. To do something differently, you need to think differently and make different choices. Small, easy, doable tasks add up to big changes in the long haul, even when they seem minuscule in the present moment.

The question I want to encourage you to ask yourself this week is this: What is one small, doable thing that will get me to my goal? Once you pick

Ep #194: Why Grand Plans Fail and a Better Way to Reach Your Goals

that, especially if you have a tendency to make really big goals that you don't follow through on, take that one thing and make it even smaller.

Shrink it to something so easily doable that it's almost laughable. But something that is actually a little something different than what you're currently doing. Then, go do that.

As you do this, watch your mind come up with all sorts of objections. Like, "This is silly. This is not enough. I need to do more. If I start here, I'll never get there." Then, on purpose, counter these objections. Counter all this chatter with a really strong reminder. Big changes that last start with small changes that last.

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.